

CONVERSATIONS WITH

Edmund White

EDITED BY WILL BRANTLEY AND NANCY McGUIRE ROCHE



Conversations with Edmund White

Literary Conversations Series

Monika Gehlawat

General Editor

Conversations with Edmund White

Edited by Will Brantley and Nancy McGuire Roche

University Press of Mississippi / *Jackson*

www.upress.state.ms.us

The University Press of Mississippi is a member of the Association of American University Presses.

Copyright © 2017 by University Press of Mississippi
All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United States of America

First printing 2017

∞

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: White, Edmund, 1940– | Brantley, Will, editor. | Roche, Nancy McGuire, editor.
Title: Conversations with Edmund White / edited by Will Brantley and Nancy McGuire Roche.

Description: Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 2017. | Series: Literary conversations series | Includes index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017017861 (print) | LCCN 2017033168 (ebook) | ISBN 9781496813565 (epub single) | ISBN 9781496813572 (epub institutional) | ISBN 9781496813589 (pdf single) | ISBN 9781496813596 (pdf institutional) | ISBN 9781496813558 (hardback) | ISBN 9781496815057 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: White, Edmund, 1940—Interviews. | Authors, American—20th century—Interviews. | Gay authors—United States—Interviews. | Gay men—United States—Interviews. | BISAC: BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY / Literary. | SOCIAL SCIENCE / Gay Studies.

Classification: LCC PS3573.H463 (ebook) | LCC PS3573.H463 Z48 2017 (print) | DDC 813/.54 [B] —dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017017861>

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

Books by Edmund White

- Forgetting Elena*. New York: Random House, 1973.
- The Joy of Gay Sex: An Intimate Guide for Gay Men to the Pleasures of a Gay Lifestyle*. With Charles Silverstein. New York: Crown Books, 1977.
- Nocturnes for the King of Naples*. New York: St. Martin's, 1978.
- States of Desire: Travels in Gay America*. New York: Dutton, 1980.
- A Boy's Own Story*. New York: Dutton, 1982.
- Caracole*. New York: Dutton, 1985.
- The Darker Proof: Stories from a Crisis*. With Adam Mars-Jones. London: Faber & Faber, 1987.
- The Beautiful Room Is Empty*. New York: Random House, 1988.
- Genet: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- The Burning Library: Essays*. Ed. David Bergman. New York: Knopf, 1994.
- Our Paris: Sketches from Memory*. With Hubert Sorin. New York: Knopf, 1995.
- Skinned Alive: Stories*. New York: Knopf, 1995.
- The Farewell Symphony*. New York: Knopf, 1997.
- Marcel Proust*. New York: Viking, 1999.
- The Married Man*. New York: Knopf, 2000.
- The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2001.
- Fanny: A Fiction*. New York: Ecco, 2003.
- Arts and Letters*. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2004.
- My Lives: A Memoir*. New York: Ecco, 2006.
- Chaos: A Novella and Stories*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2007.
- Hotel de Dream: A New York Novel*. New York: Ecco, 2007.
- Terra Haute*. London: Methuen Drama, 2007.
- Rimbaud: The Double Life of a Rebel*. New York: Atlas & Co., 2008.
- City Boy: My Life in New York During the 1960s and '70s*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2009.
- Sacred Monsters*. New York: Magnus Books, 2011.
- Jack Holmes and His Friend*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2012.
- Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Our Young Man*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.

Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Chronology](#)

[PW Interviews: Edmund White](#)

William Goldstein / 1982

[An Interview with Edmund White](#)

Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory / 1985

[Edmund White: The Art of Fiction 105](#)

Jordan Elgrably / 1988

[An Interview with Edmund White](#)

Kay Bonetti / 1989

[Paris Interview with Edmund White](#)

Dawn-Michelle Baude / 1991

[From the Stonewall to *The Burning Library*: Interview with Edmund White](#)

Ryan Prout / 1994

[The Day That Edmund White Kissed Me](#)

Greg Johnston / 1995

[Edmund White in Conversation](#)

Mark Ford / 1996

[Edmund White](#)

Ron Hogan / 1997

[Edmund White: The Man Who Wrote *The Married Man*](#)

Christopher Matthew Hennessy / 2001

[The Sensual Part of Beauty Is the Wound](#)

Chris Freeman / 2003

[AIDS, Arts, and Responsibilities: An Interview with Edmund White](#)

Mark Mascolini / 2005

[Line of Beauty: Laurie Taylor Interviews Edmund White](#)

Laurie Taylor / 2005

[Edmund White: *Hotel de Dream*](#)

Michael Leonard / 2007

[Poetry as a “Disordering of the Senses”](#)

Michael Ehrhardt / 2009

[New York City Boy: A Conversation with Edmund White](#)

Richard Canning / 2009

[An Interview with Edmund White](#)

Carlos Motta / 2011

[Interview: Edmund White](#)

Patrick Ryan / 2012

[Edmund White: Invention, Imagination, and Memory](#)

Frank Pizzoli / 2012

[Q&A with Edmund White](#)

Jon Wiener / 2014

[The Art of Being Edmund White: A Capstone Interview](#)

Will Brantley and Nancy McGuire Roche / 2016

[Index](#)

Introduction

Readers acquainted with the writing of Edmund White already know a great deal about his life. White's fiction is often autobiographical, and he is the author of three celebrated memoirs in addition to many self-reflective essays on other artists and cultural trends. White is also a noted raconteur who has used interviews to promote his work and vision and to engage in dialogue with readers. Hence the value of a collection such as this one.

For those readers who are interested in sexuality, White has chronicled gay culture as it has taken shape since the Stonewall uprising of 1969. For many readers, White's collected works have come to define an era. Gore Vidal may have been the central gay American writer in the years before gay liberation, as Christopher Bram argues in *Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America*, but Edmund White has occupied that position since the 1970s.¹

"If you had to write a PhD thesis on the works of Edmund White, what would it be about?" This flattering question was posed to White at the end of an interview in 1994. Although he generally resists a coherent summary of his work, White replied that the thesis would be "about somebody who was subjected to a tension arising from two very different sets of expectations: one set came from a literary community that wasn't particularly gay-identified and the other came from a gay community that wasn't particularly literary. I think the tension has been a fruitful one and an unusual one for a writer." White added that it wasn't until Vladimir Nabokov praised his first published novel, *Forgetting Elena* (1973), that people began to take notice of his work, even people who had no interest in homosexuality.²

White is, of course, more than just a celebrated gay writer; he is an international man of letters with a body of work that spans five decades and crosses several genres. White's fiction includes a well-known autobiographical trilogy—*A Boy's Own Story* (1982), *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* (1988), and *The Farewell Symphony* (1997)—along with collections of short stories and more recent novels such as *Jack Holmes and His Friend* (2012) and *Our Young Man* (2016). For most of the 1980s and 1990s White lived in France. His love of French literature and culture led to *Genet: A Biography* (1993), *Marcel Proust* (1998), and *Rimbaud: The Double Life of a Rebel* (2008). White's rejection of American Puritanism and conventional sexual mores suffuses his memoirs—*My Lives* (2005), *City Boy* (2009), and *Inside a Pearl* (2014)—and is on full display in two early nonfiction works: *The Joy of Gay Sex*, coauthored with Dr. Charles Silverstein (1977), and *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* (1980).

Through interviews, White has reflected on the various forces and preferences that have marked his career. When he began publishing in his early thirties, White discovered that publishers who had become used to modernist tropes were not yet receptive to explicit novels about middle-class gays. White therefore turned to experimental fiction. In interviews included here, White draws connections between these two strands of his career—between, for instance, an elusive and mysterious novel such as *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* (1978) and a more popular and critically successful novel such as *A Boy's Own Story*, often cited as his signature work. Through interviews, White clarifies his rejection of universalism (he considers it a reactionary term) and his

antipathy to psychoanalysis (he calls it a god that failed). White explains why he disdains irony, why he favors complexity and sensual detail, and why he prefers the concrete to the philosophical novel. Along the way, he praises those writers that he loves—Nabokov and Colette, among others—and dismisses those, including Thomas Mann and John Updike, whose works are not to his taste. Interviews enable White to stress his beliefs that a good novelist seduces a reader and that writers write best when they confront ambivalence.

Clearly, White loves to talk. Carefully gauging his audience with each occasion, White has granted press interviews with frequency and has aimed to rethink even the most routine questions in order to avoid canned responses. Given the extent of his literary output, it may surprise readers to learn from interviews that White writes very little. He has returned to unpublished novels for material that can be transformed, but he embraces no consistent habit and even says that he does not work especially hard. White has told several interviewers that he lives his life as a novel, and he freely acknowledges the friction between his quest for experience and the solitude that makes writing possible.

White does not apologize for life choices that clash with expectations of appropriate behavior. It is White's fierce independence and departures from critical consensus that have made him such a valuable cultural commentator. Early on, White rejected the notion that human sexuality can be explained. He thus rejected the demand for positive gay role models, calling for separation rather than assimilation. White's defense of promiscuity and his insistence that gays and lesbians contribute to society through their difference have sparked some highly publicized skirmishes with Andrew Sullivan, Larry Kramer, and other prominent figures in the gay rights movement.

The interviews make clear White's positions. While he participated in the heady excitement of gay life in the 1970s, White explains that he could not depict that decade without also depicting the physical and cultural decimation of the decade that followed. Although AIDS figures prominently in his own fiction, White grew impatient with the sentimentality and melodrama of "AIDS art." And although he was gratified to play a leading role in the emergence of vibrant gay community centers and bookstores, White also witnessed—and denounced—the rise of a gay consumerist aesthetic at odds with the more inclusive goals of gay liberation.

Gay bookstores have now largely disappeared—victims of assimilation and the Internet—but the post-gay era has not eliminated the many conundrums that confront any gay man or woman who seeks self-understanding. As White remarks to Frank Pizzoli, gays must constantly "translate" into their own frames of reference the behavior and art of heterosexuals. Advances in gay rights have not altered this reality, nor have they diminished the need for writers who continue to acknowledge and render the specificity of gay experiences.

This collection begins in 1982 with William Goldstein's interview in *Publishers Weekly*. This interview gave White the opportunity to talk about some of the assumptions that accompanied his early status as a gay writer and to explain his goals in a mainstream publication with a very wide circulation, one that targeted key players in the publishing industry.

The three interviews that follow are from distinguished literary journals, and together they comprise the lengthiest section of this volume. The *Paris Review* is of course renowned for its Writers at Work series, in which authors are given the chance to define themselves through extended conversation. Speaking with

Jordan Elgrably, White discusses, among other topics, his early influences and writing practices, the grants and fellowships that enable artists to write, and differences between American and European literary traditions. Equally probing are the interviews with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory in *Mississippi Review* and with Kay Bonetti in the *Missouri Review*. With McCaffery and Gregory, White talks about women's fiction in the 1970s, literary experimentation, autobiographical fiction, the musical components of his work, and other writers that he admires, including Ronald Firkbank and Coleman Dowell. With Bonetti, White discusses his educational background, his interactions with students, stigmas that accompany gay literature, the influence of Michel Foucault, and the effects of AIDS on the homosexual community in the 1980s.

White talks about his years in Paris with Dawn-Michelle Baude in *Paris Voice*, a webzine for English-speaking Parisians. While residing in Paris, White published *The Burning Library*, his first collection of articles and reviews, including his frequently cited catalogue-essay on Robert Mapplethorpe. White spoke with Ryan Prout in the *Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review* (forerunner of the *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*) about this collection, with comments on gay liberation in the context of the 1990s' culture wars. In 1995 White flew to Australia to participate in an opening of Mapplethorpe's works. There he spoke with Greg Johnston in the magazine *Island*, commenting at some length on why he is more of a separatist than an assimilationist, and why he views the literary canon—a key topic in the decade's culture wars—as fundamentally a conservative construct.

As an international figure, White has taken pleasure in observing diverse cultural reactions to his work, especially from readers in France, his adopted home, and from those in the UK. In 1996 he talked with English poet Mark Ford in the *PN Review*, explaining why he rejects individual psychology in favor of an era's effect on an individual life—a preference that illuminates the approach he took in his long-in-the-making biography of French writer Jean Genet. Shortly after this book appeared, White spoke with writer Ron Hogan in *Beatrice*, another early literary webzine. With Hogan, White addresses the vagaries of literary reputation, including his own transition from “struggling writer” to “Edmund White, gay literary icon.”

With *The Farewell Symphony* in 1997, White completed the autobiographical trilogy that began with *A Boy's Own Story* in 1982 and continued with *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* in 1988. White initially envisioned an autobiographical tetralogy, but decided to collapse his experience of the 1970s and 1980s into the lengthy third novel. White did, however, produce a tetralogy of sorts, for his next novel, *The Married Man* (2000), is also autobiographical, departing from the earlier trilogy through its use of a third-person narrator. White discussed this work with Christopher Hennessy in a *Provincetown Arts* interview that distills his views on gay marriage.

While most of the interviews in this collection coincide with the publication of a specific book by White, two were prompted by the interviewer's desire to hear White talk about a given subject. Speaking with Chris Freeman in the *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, White confronts the accusation that he has been obsessed with beauty; and speaking with Mark Mascolini in the monthly newsletter of the International Association of Physicians in AIDS Care, White recounts his experience of AIDS and offers personal advice to HIV clinicians.

White is fond of citing André Gide's notion that a good writer loses admirers with each new book. In an interview for the *New Humanist*, Laurie Taylor

suggests that White probably lost a few admirers with the publication in 2005 of *My Lives*, his first memoir. With his socialist predisposition and disdain for fundamentalist extremism, White's values are congruent with those of the Rationalist Association that publishes the *New Humanist*, but White acknowledges that the sexually explicit nature of *My Lives* might rattle some readers. He nonetheless defends the candid and confessional nature of his first memoir. White followed *My Lives* with the less controversial *Hotel de Dream*, a historical novel inspired by rumors of Stephen Crane's unpublished novel about a male prostitute, and he speaks about the genesis of and sources for this novel with Michael Leonard in the webzine *Curled Up with a Good Book*.

Perhaps no interviewer has cultivated a stronger rapport with and interviewed White on more occasions than Michael Ehrhardt in the *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*. In 2009 Ehrhardt solicited from White this memorable distinction between fiction and visual media:

I believe that fiction remains the most ambitious account of how we live now, because it includes subjectivity, which movies and TV cannot, unless you have voiceovers, but those never work out. I mean, most of us live inside our heads, and we're constantly evaluating the situations around us. We act, but not that much. Consider that many movies are about people with guns, while I don't think I've seen more than two guns in my lifetime. Most movies are about something that doesn't really happen to ordinary people, and what does happen, which is living in your head and processing your own experience, does take place in fiction. So, if you're interested in reality and how to understand it, fiction's the place to go. That's my commercial for fiction.³

In the Ehrhardt interview selected for this volume, White talks about his biography of Arthur Rimbaud, with reflections on the French poet's influences, his homosexuality, his alliance with Paul Verlaine, and his now legendary status. *Rimbaud: The Double Life of a Rebel* appeared in 2009, the same year as White's second memoir, *City Boy: My Life in New York During the 1960s and '70s*. White discusses key figures of this era, including his friend Susan Sontag, with writer Richard Canning in *CHROMA*, a queer literary and arts journal from the UK.

In 2011, Carlos Motta interviewed White for *We Who Feel Differently*, another webzine devoted to issues in contemporary queer culture. Motta provides a wide-ranging interview that centers on White's sense of himself as a shaping force in the discourse of gay culture, his participation in the 1969 Stonewall riots and their aftermath, his indifference to gay monogamy, the effect of AIDS on his work, and his role as a literary biographer.

With the literary quarterly *Granta*, White talks about his tenth novel, *Jack Holmes and His Friend*, and the inspiration provided by novelists Richard Yates and Henry Green. *Jack Holmes* is also a topic of Frank Pizzoli's 2012 *Lambda Literary* interview in which White reflects on the gay literary group known as the Violet Quill and on readers' attachment to the extra-artistic images that surround well-known writers—a chief concern of *Sacred Monsters*, White's third collection of essays. Rounding out the collected interviews is Jon Wiener's brief *Nation* piece in which White, having just published his third memoir, *Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris* (2014), comments on his designation as a Commander of the French Order of Arts and Letters. The volume concludes with a previously unpublished interview with the editors. Here White discusses his most recent novel, *Our Young Man* (2016), and answers questions that haven't appeared in

previous interviews.

Not every great literary figure is a great interview subject, but Edmund White's interviews can themselves be seen as a significant part of his literary oeuvre. Selecting twenty interviews from five times that number has posed pleasurable challenges. The aim has been to include pieces from a range of publications that collectively highlight White's predilections, his achievements, and the pivotal moments in his long and varied career. We are grateful to David Lavery for technical assistance; to Michael Carroll for help in securing permissions; and to Angelo Pitillo and Angela Hague for reading the manuscript and making helpful suggestions. And, of course, we are grateful to Edmund White for providing all these opportunities to hear him converse. In an email to the editors, White offered this telling observation: "Critics and interviewers often ask unexpected questions, which open the mind to unsuspected vistas. I have learned so much over the years from sharp and unpredictable questions."⁴

WB & NMR

Notes

1. Christopher Bram, *Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America* (New York: Twelve, 2012), 175. For more discussion of White's literary significance, see Nicholas F. Radel, *Understanding Edmund White* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013).

2. Ryan Prout, "From the Stonewall to *The Burning Library*," *Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review* 1.4 (Fall 1994): 8. Further references to interviews included in this volume will indicate the interviewer or the periodical in which the interview appeared.

3. Michael Ehrhardt, "I Slid Back into the Sixties," *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 16.6 (November–December 2009): 13.

4. Email message from Edmund White to Nancy McGuire Roche, February 29, 2016.

Chronology

1940-1962 Cincinnati, Ohio, to Texas parents who divorce when White is seven; lives primarily with mother and sister in Chicago and other cities in the Midwest and in Texas; attends Cranbrook preparatory school in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan (the source of White's fictional Eton); graduates from the University of Michigan; declines admission to Harvard University's doctoral program in Chinese studies.

1962-1970 is a staff writer for Time-Life Books in New York City and as a freelance writer for *Newsweek*; an early play, *The Blue Boy in Black*, is produced off-Broadway and receives a Hopwood Award (1962).

1969 takes part in the Stonewall Uprising in Greenwich Village, the event that galvanizes the modern gay rights movement.

1970 goes to Rome, Italy, for six months.

1970-1973 is a senior editor of the *Saturday Review* in San Francisco.

1973 publishes first novel, *Forgetting Elena*, which centers on an amnesiac in a resort that mirrors Fire Island; the novel is later praised by Vladimir Nabokov, White's favorite writer.

1974-1975 is an associate editor of *Horizon*, a quarterly cultural journal, and contributes book reviews to the *New Republic*; begins teaching career at Yale University, with subsequent appointments at other institutions.

1977 decides against using a pseudonym to publish, with Dr. Charles Silverstein, *The Joy of Gay Sex: An Intimate Guide for Gay Men to the Pleasures of a Gay Lifestyle*; the book sells well and provides income for the next two years.

1978 publishes second novel, *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, an experimental second-person narrative in which a young man reflects on his older lover.

1980 publishes *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* (reissued in 2014 with a new introduction), a work that establishes White as a key commentator on gay culture.

1980-1981 works in progress with the Violet Quill, a pivotal gay writers group consisting of White, Christopher Cox, Robert Ferro, Michael Grumley, Andrew Holleran, Felice Picano, and George Whitmore.

1980-1982 is executive director of the New York Institute of the Humanities.

1982 publishes *A Boy's Own Story*, White's best-known novel and the first in an autobiographical trilogy; co-founds and becomes first president of the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City, formed in response to the emerging AIDS epidemic.

1983 receives a Guggenheim Fellowship and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award for Fiction.

1983-1984 in Paris; freelances for *Vogue* and other Condé Nast publications.

1984 participates in the formation of AIDES, the French HIV/AIDS foundation.

1985 publishes fourth novel, *Caracole*, which deals with heterosexuality and which returns to the experimental mode of White's published fiction in the 1970s.

1987 publishes, with Adam Mars-Jones, *The Darker Proof: Stories from a Crisis*, as an attempt to counter the medical stigma of the AIDS experience; provides one of his most frequently cited remarks in "Aesthetics and Loss," a piece for *Artforum*: "To have been oppressed in the '50s, freed in the '60s, exalted in the '70s, and wiped out in the '80s is a quick itinerary for a whole culture to follow. For we

are witnessing not just the death of individuals but a menace to an entire culture. All the more reason to bear witness to the cultural moment.”

1988 Publishes *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, the second novel of autobiographical trilogy.

1988 Publishes “Residence on Earth: Living with AIDS in the 1980s” in *Life*; receives the Publishing Triangle’s Award for Lifetime Achievement.

1990 Goes to Paris to teach for a year and a half at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

1992 Writes an introduction to a reissue of *Prisoner of Love* by Jean Genet; edits *The Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction*.

1993 Publishes the long-awaited *Genet: A Biography*; edits *The Selected Writings of Jean Genet*; made a Chevalier (later Officier) in the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Government.

1994 Publishes first collection of nonfiction, *The Burning Library: Writings on Art, Politics, and Sexuality, 1969–1993* (edited by David Bergman); receives National Book Critics Circle Award and Lambda Literary Award for biography of Jean Genet; is again recognized by the Publishing Triangle, which names its debut fiction award in honor of White.

1995 Publishes first solo collection of short fiction, *Skinny Alive: Stories*; publishes *Our Paris: Sketches from Memory*, with drawings by recently deceased partner Hubert Sorin; travels to Australia for an exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe’s work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.

1997 Publishes *The Farewell Symphony*, the final novel in autobiographical trilogy; made a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters; publishes “Journals of the Plague Years” in the *Nation* and “The Joy of Gay Lit” in *Out*; provides a foreword to *The Best of the Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*.

2000 Returns to the United States to become professor of creative writing at Princeton University.

2000 Publishes *Marcel Proust: A Life*; provides an introduction to the Oxford University Press edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde; made a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

2001 Publishes *The Married Man: A Novel*; contributes to *Lost Classics: Writers on Books Loved and Lost, Overlooked, Under-read, Unavailable, Stolen, Extinct, or Otherwise Out of Commission*, edited by Michael Ondaatje, et al.

2001 Publishes *The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris*, which becomes a *New York Times* Best Seller; edits *Loss within Loss: Artists in the Age of AIDS*; provides an introduction to *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958–1996* by Allen Ginsberg.

2003 Publishes first historical novel, *Fanny: A Fiction*, an imaginative account of nineteenth-century novelist Frances Trollope and social reformer Frances Wright.

2004 Publishes second collection of nonfiction, *Arts and Letters*; selects the entries for *Fresh Men: New Voices in Gay Fiction*, edited by Donald Weise.

2006 Publishes first book-length memoir, *My Lives: An Autobiography*, which is often noted for its unapologetically explicit details; provides an introduction to a reissue of *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue: Scenes from the Non-Christian World* by Paul Bowles (1956).

2007 Publishes second collection of short fiction, *Chaos: A Novella and Stories*, and second historical novel, *Hotel de Dream: A New York Novel*, a fictional response to rumors of Stephen Crane’s suppressed novel about a male prostitute.

2008 Publishes *Rimbaud: The Double Life of a Rebel*.

~~2009~~ Publishes best known play, *Terre Haute* (first performed in 2006) and second book-length autobiography, *City Boy: My Life in New York During the 1960s and '70s*, which contains revealing portraits of White's contemporaries, including Susan Sontag.

~~2011~~ Publishes third collection of nonfiction, *Sacred Monsters*; suffers but recovers from a stroke.

~~2012~~ Publishes tenth novel, *Jack Holmes and His Friend: A Novel*, which chronicles a gay-straight friendship between two men, beginning in the New York publishing world of the 1960s.

~~2013~~ Marries longtime partner Michael Carroll.

~~2014~~ Publishes third book-length memoir, *Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris*; suffers a heart attack but regains mobility and continues to write.

~~2015~~ Publishes eleventh novel, *Our Young Man*.

Conversations with Edmund White

PW Interviews: Edmund White

William Goldstein / 1982

From *Publishers Weekly*, September 24, 1982, 6–8. Reprinted by permission.

Edmund White is perhaps one of the most candid gay writers in America today. He speaks forthrightly about the implications of his previous books—two novels, two nonfiction works—and is now ready to do the same for his third novel, *A Boy's Own Story* (*PW* Forecasts, Aug. 6), which Dutton is just publishing. But to call Edmund White merely a gay writer is to oversimplify his work and his intentions. Although that two-word label—"gay writer"—aptly sums up White's status, the first word no doubt helps obscure the fact that the second applies just as fittingly. A conversation with him demonstrates a rebellion against the limitations of any label, even one appropriately applied.

White speaks frankly about this tag he's been given: "I'm happy to be considered a gay writer," he says. "When books first emerge, they obviously emerge in a specific context. I think that's fine because that attracts an initial audience, an initial excitement and interest. But if a book is worthy to survive, it will, and then it'll pass out of that classification into a more general literary one. I would hope that eventually my books would be good enough to be read simply as works of literature, as stories."

Such a sobriquet carries with it certain drawbacks, however, White finds. "Being a gay writer means being slashed by a two-edged sword," he says. "There's a backlash not only from straight people, who often ignore your work because of its subject, but there's one from gay people, too."

"Since gay people have very little political representation, we have no gay spokespeople. What happens is that there is an enormous pressure placed on gay novelists because they are virtually the *only* spokespeople. The problem is that the novelist's first obligation is to be true to his own vision, not to be some sort of common denominator or public relations man to all gay people. People are looking for upbeat bromides. Everything is read as though it's a sort of allegory about the political dimensions of homosexuality as a general topic, rather than as a specific story about a specific person. That's understandable, because there are so few gay books, but it is regrettable because it is really an Early Stalinist view of art as propaganda."

Already the gay press is dissecting *A Boy's Own Story*, a book of six chapters (some of which were published in *Christopher Street*, *Antaeus*, and *Shenandoah*) about a boy's sexual and emotional coming of age.

White reports that a *Mandate* reviewer "takes me to task for presenting characters who seem uncomfortable with homosexuality, instead of showing characters happy with being gay. I feel it wouldn't be true to the experience of my characters if I showed them gliding blissfully through, when it was obviously a painful thing coming out in a period before gay liberation."

The setting of the novel is not specified in the text, but White adds, "I wanted to reflect the period and place I was writing about because the boy I am writing about was coming out in the 1950s in the Midwest, before there was any gay pride or gay consciousness at all."

The title suggests autobiography, and White admits, "*A Boy's Own Story* is certainly a novel that's semi-autobiographical, in that 50 to 60 percent of its content is true, and I think the character is based on me to some degree, but he's more innocent and less resourceful than I was in real life. He's more of a victim than I was. For one thing, I was more popular than the boy in the book, who is fairly withdrawn. But to the degree that I became popular, it happened fairly late. When I was a boy, my mother moved every year following her divorce from my father, and I never grew up in one place. Almost by definition I was unpopular."

White remembers himself as a fairly bookish boy whose friendships were with books. "And with adults, too," he says. "I knew quite a few adults and probably would speak to them more easily than to people my own age. I socialized with my teachers even when I was in third and fourth grades. I would ask them out for tea! I was probably more of a brat, a showoff, and more precocious than the boy in the book is."

A strongly autobiographical element of *A Boy's Own Story* is the young boy's psychoanalysis, which forms a comic centerpiece of two of the book's later chapters. The comedy, however, is deathly black. "My portrait of the psychoanalyst [a bumbler who retails his own problems to his patients] is true to the period. Psychoanalysis was all-powerful. It is now a god that has failed, but in that period, many psychiatrists led very peculiar lives and made their patients follow extraordinary regimes. Mine wasn't Freudian psychology, strictly speaking, but some bland American revisionism that felt homosexuality was a disease, a symptom of a deeper disturbance, a failure to identify with the father."

And so White spent his entire twenties in psychoanalysis, trying to be cured of what was diagnosed as his "problem."

"Maybe mine was a particularly benighted case," he recalls, "but certainly coming out for me was painful, and I was by no means reconciled to being gay for many years. Even as late as my late twenties, I was engaged to be married. I was always fighting it."

Now he credits his treatment by an avowedly gay psychiatrist with enabling him to come to terms with his sexual orientation. He realized that "my problems were personal, not generic. It was not my homosexuality that was the issue but simply my problems in dealing with my life as a private person."

After college, White moved from the Midwest to New York, where he worked at Time-Life for eight years, from 1962 to 1970. "Being a simple boy from Chicago, I was quite surprised by how rarefied, stratified, sophisticated, and devious the literary world and the publishing world in New York is. A midwesterner really does work at a disadvantage in New York."

In 1973, Random House published White's first novel, *Forgetting Elena*, a "surreal novel about a man who wakes up in a strange land with amnesia, which he doesn't want anyone to know he has," according to its author. It is also a novel not explicitly gay. "*Elena* was maybe my fifth novel," he says. "It took me forever to meet people in the literary world and to find my way in New York. I was always writing novels and could never get anything published until I was thirty-three."

After *Elena*, White worked for five years on a novel rejected by twenty-two publishers. He describes it as "a look at radical politics in the late sixties, a look at midwesterners coming to New York, trying to acclimate themselves. It was also a look at the conflict and the common ground between straights and gays

who happen to be friends. No one was interested. It was turned down by everyone in New York. It was probably the most crushing blow of my life. Then I wrote *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, my baroque novel, a novel filled with a young man's ruminations about an old lover, an older man he rebelled against too strongly. The book is full of references to baroque poetry and painting, and it seemed totally inaccessible to me, a completely private novel. I can't say it was snapped up, because it went to twelve publishers, but at least it was eventually published." St. Martin's Press was the house.

The Joy of Gay Sex with Dr. Charles Silverstein came in 1977, before *King of Naples*, and now White confesses, "I considered publishing that one under a different name, but to write a book telling people to be happy being gay and then to sign it with a pen name is obviously ludicrous. It was a real act of coming out for me, because people who write sex manuals are frowned upon by literary people. There's that problem, and then there's the problem of being so conspicuously identified as a gay writer."

Published in 1979, *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* was overtly gay, as was the nonfiction book that Dutton published next, *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America*. Despite the vast differences in each of his books, White believes there is a common theme running throughout: "I've only recently become aware of it," he says, "but it seems to concern a young man who's entering a sophisticated world that puzzles him. *States of Desire* is quite literally a journey through a mysterious and puzzling country, the United States. I was quite literally the wide-eyed innocent looking at the world."

Like most writers, White relies on his perceptions of the world, and he strives to be seen as a writer of literary works: "I think 'literary' is not necessarily a word of praise. It's a word of description; there's almost a category of literary or serious fiction. I may write *bad* literary fiction, but I feel that at least I'm writing literary fiction. The market I'm going for, the kind of reader I'm looking for, is one who is not simply looking for entertainment, but is looking for whatever we look for from art. American writers must really make the choice between being so-called literary authors and popular authors." White's own favorites are definitely literary authors: Tolstoy, Herzen, and Proust.

Aside from writing, White has two jobs. He is executive director of the New York Institute for the Humanities, a scholarly group that sponsors seminars, lectures, and roundtable discussions, based at New York University and supported by the school and national grants, and he is a teacher of creative writing at Columbia. "I write lots of articles," he says. "I know I'll always be doing this, and I know that I'll never make a living from my writing; but that's fine. It's enough to be published. I don't know why people complain so much. I've been fortunate in having older friends who are much more famous than I'll ever be, and the valuable thing about this is that one can see that even the famous don't necessarily have lovers, and they don't even have enough money to live on. In this country, it's possible to be an extremely well-known writer and still be completely broke. But what fame does ensure is a chance to be published, and people will pay attention. As someone who tried for years and years to get published, I'm so thrilled to have anything published, I would *pay* to have it published. To me, that's enough. I don't have very exalted notions of what a writer's life should be like."

An Interview with Edmund White

Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory / 1985

Originally appeared in *Mississippi Review* 13.3 (1985): 9–27. Included in McCaffery and Gregory's *Alive and Writing: Interviews with American Authors of the 1980s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987) and reprinted with permission.

Edmund White's first novel, *Forgetting Elena* (1973), had the sort of critical reception a writer might dream of (among numerous other accolades, Vladimir Nabokov called it the contemporary American novel he admired most). Written in an elusive, elliptical style, bare of metaphor, *Forgetting Elena* is a hallucinogenic novel, part science fiction, part detective story, part comedy of manners. It's a work that exudes mystery—the mystery of human desires and motives, the mystery of the signs and symbols we use to communicate those desires. This evocative sense of mystery permeates White's second novel, *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* (1978) as well, but it is developed through a prose style that is altogether different. Lush, baroque, and marked by elaborate and complex metaphor, *Nocturnes* is as richly textured and otherworldly as a medieval allegory. *A Boy's Own Story* (1982) shows still another transformation of White's style. In this book, loosely based on White's own adolescent experiences during the 1950s, the prose has a less ornamental quality to it and the narrative proceeds in a more straightforward, realistic fashion—characteristics which probably help explain its popularity with a wider audience than White had previously enjoyed.

These transformations, as the following interview indicates, are selfconsciously strived for by White. Such dramatic alterations of style, narrative structure, and use of language partly result from his conviction that a writer must always begin anew, that for language to function it must be freshly conceived. Certainly there is also the element of play in White's stylistic changes—a willingness to experiment with the variety of forms human expression can take, an appreciation for our restless, curious need to try on different masks, different personae. These aesthetic and philosophical considerations aside, the changes of voice have been affected as well by his evolving ideas about politics and about social and sexual contracts. As White well knows, to be an openly gay writer in today's society is to be thrust into a political arena—no less than personal liberty is at stake, as organizations across the country continue to campaign against homosexuality. White's first nonfiction book, *The Joy of Gay Sex* (1979, coauthored with Dr. Charles Silverstein), aimed both to demystify the experience for non-gays and to provide practical information for members of the gay community. To practice certain forms of intercourse in our society is not only a sexual act but a political one as well, and in this sense *The Joy of Gay Sex* has had an influence far beyond the usual sex manual. But White's next nonfiction book, *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* (1980), is more overtly political in its intent. As White traveled across the United States—meeting and interviewing men from a variety of backgrounds, experiencing what gay life is like in conservative cities (like Memphis and Houston) as well as in its traditional enclaves like New York and San Francisco—he came to deeper awarenesses about political and social

disenfranchisement and about how definitions of sexuality enter into civic as well as social contracts. Written in a journalistic style as a travelogue of his experiences, *States of Desire* forced White to develop a means of capturing people in brief, pointed character sketches and to present himself as an “I” persona—techniques, as well as a kind of psychological exercise, that were to influence *A Boy’s Own Story*.

These ongoing changes of style and voice made us feel a bit less certain than usual about what sort of man we were going to be meeting when, in May 1984, we huffed up the five flights of stairs to his apartment in Paris on the Île St. Louis. As we waited in the ancient landing to catch our breath, we could hear opera music inside, and we could imagine White sitting inside in a smoking jacket raising a jaded, ironic eyebrow—something out of *Nocturnes*. But the man who opened the door was no Proustian neurasthenic aesthete but a warm, animated man who put us instantly at ease with his wit (which he frequently turned on himself) and his charm. While we got acquainted over lunch at a busy, family-style brasserie, White expressed his delight at being in Paris, freed temporarily from his teaching duties (he had won a Guggenheim Fellowship), and sketched in some of the details about the Paris literary scene and about his personal background. White is a writer whose brilliance and articulation are obvious even in casual conversation, but he was even more impressive when we returned to his apartment and the focus of our conversation became more literary and abstract. Not only does White have a wide-ranging view of all the arts, but he is able to discuss them with the passion and excitement of someone still making fresh discoveries.

Larry McCaffery: One hears a lot these days about “the gay sensibility.” Is there such a thing?

Edmund White: I think there are *several* gay sensibilities, for gay people do not comprise a supra-historical entity outside of history or politics. They are influenced by the culture around them, the way everybody else is. So, for example, to posit a “feminine sensibility” or a “French sensibility” or a “Black sensibility” is irrational because it imagines that people exist outside of the historical conditions in which they live. It does seem to me there was and is a particular evolving gay sensibility in certain countries, within certain classes. But it’s interesting that the most characteristic representatives of the gay sensibility of the 1890s fin-de-siècle culture of Europe were not gay—Huysmans in France and Aubrey Beardsley in England, for instance, neither of whom happened to be gay. In the same way, you could say that in the thirties and forties there was a camp sensibility. But, again, not every major camp figure from that period was gay.

Sinda Gregory: Is there anything so clear-cut that can be identified today in America? You indicate in *States of Desire* that you thought there was a change going on in the gay community, perhaps in response to gay lib ...

EW: I don’t know what it is now. Perhaps we’re witnessing a reaction against “indirection.” A writer like Genet is a classic case of gay indirection because he was always trying to attack a value system that had condemned him to the lowest rank by suggesting that such a system could be reversed. It’s basically the Christian notion that the last shall come first. Genet develops the reversibility of values to the level of a metaphysical system that is incredibly beautiful. Now the sociological, historical, and political impulses behind that vision are changing, so probably the need to be that indirect is vanishing.

LM: Why aren't there more serious gay books being published today?

EW: In the mid-seventies there was a kind of enthusiasm for publishing lots of gay titles, but a lot of junk was brought out that didn't do very well, so now the number of gay books has fallen off for commercial reasons. Interestingly enough, gays represent a large part of the reading market for serious fiction. In America most readers are middle-aged Jewish heterosexual women who are college educated. After that, I suspect that gay men in their thirties or forties, also college educated, are the second biggest market for fiction and literature. Maybe college students are a distant third. But gay readers aren't obliged to read only gay books. Like everybody else, they want to read the best books they can.

SG: The same sort of thing seemed to happen with women's fiction during the seventies—we had that glut of “feminine novels,” usually victimization stories that publishers thought would go over well at the marketplace. But the “woman's novel” became a formula (probably much the same thing happened with gay fiction). It's time to move on to other dimensions of the woman's situation, explore things in different ways, deal with areas that have been overlooked.

EW: Exactly, and that's why Colette is so eternally fashionable: she was a woman who had a real life and a real *joie de vivre* and who was independent and who had a phase as a lesbian and a period as a performer, a mime artist, and she had these complicated love relationships with younger men, and so on. She had a lot of experiences that she writes about and she's perennially interesting. Much more interesting than the Marilyn Frenchs of the world. With most gay fiction there remains a tremendous gap between actual gay experience and the gay fiction that's written about it. Most gay novels are still novels about coming out, including my own book *A Boy's Own Story*, but that situation has now been pretty thoroughly explored by gay writers. What gay people would really like, I suspect, is to read a rather sophisticated story about actual gay relationships. There are any number of very familiar, very real relationships between gay people that every gay person would instantly recognize, but these are rarely explored by gay writers.

SG: Your first novel, *Forgetting Elena*, was published in 1973, before the flood of gay fiction. Was one of the reasons it was accepted because it wasn't overtly gay?

EW: Probably. All during the sixties I had been writing novels but *Forgetting Elena* was the first book I had written that wasn't gay. And it had a cold, icy, disciplined feeling about it that was very suited to the aesthetic spirit of New York City at that time, although it was repeatedly turned down (it went around to publishing houses for three years, from 1969 until 1972). Actually it was only finally published because Richard Howard intervened for it. He was the first writer I ever met. He guided my career for several years and is still a wonderful friend and mentor.

SG: When your narrator rejects Elena near the end of the book—was that a kind of symbolic rejection of heterosexuality?

EW: I never thought of it that way, but I'll also admit that I just wrote that novel not knowing what it meant exactly. I remember that Peggy Guggenheim was upset by his rejection of Elena and her death, and kept saying, “Why did you make her die?” I was confused and embarrassed by that question because I

had never really thought about it. I felt very much in a trance when I wrote *Forgetting Elena*, so I never felt very responsible for the action, certainly not on any political or psychological level.

LM: *Forgetting Elena* has such a strange, charged atmosphere (“Kafka meets Henry James,” Sinda has said)—were there any influences, literary or nonliterary, that affected the way that book was conceived?

EW: One interesting thing was that, then as now, I was reading a lot of Japanese literature. One of the books that had a big impact on me was a tenth-century court diary called *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* written by a woman who was a Heian courtier. She was the ultimate aesthete in a society dedicated to judging everything from an aesthetic point of view—in other words, morality had been replaced by aesthetics. That aesthetic overlay to everything became central to *Forgetting Elena*. It was odd but there seemed to me a funny kind of interaction between my reading about this remote period and my experiences on Fire Island at the time. I was also very influenced by Susan Sontag’s aesthetics when I was creating that book. In the introduction to *Against Interpretation* I seem to remember that she called a work of art a machine for creating sensation. That phrase haunted me. I was aware of manipulating readers without being aware of how I was doing it. There are a couple of other things worth mentioning about that book. The first artists I knew as an adolescent were abstract expressionists. I’ve always wondered, why hasn’t the idea of abstract expressionism been more fully embodied in literature? In a way, *Forgetting Elena* had a lot of the contentless push and pull of abstract expressionism. This was a lot more evident in its earlier versions. When the book came to Ann Freedgood at Random House, it was nothing but these mysterious, floating incidents without any plot. It was she who insisted that I give it the form of a mystery story because she wanted a payoff. I made the changes she suggested but in a sense I was violating my aesthetic notion for the book, the idea of creating these free-floating states full of dynamism. Imagine a painting by de Kooning in which you feel there is a tremendous amount of activity and surface flourish and interest in brushwork—that is, in “language” on the local level—and a feeling of a strange conception, but a conception of *what*? Of nothing, or only of art itself. That kind of verbal abstract expression is what I was interested in. I felt that Gertrude Stein had already explored the idea of creating nonsense in interesting and abstract forms, and I felt that approach seemed to be ultimately tiring to the reader because the reader, after all, will inevitably lose patience with such small compositional units. Better than juxtaposing words against words so that they would cancel each other out would be to juxtapose *scene against scene*, with the promise of a plot that didn’t pay off. In other words, I would play upon the traditional novelistic expectations of the reader and would ultimately frustrate those expectations, thereby creating a machine for creating sensation, an abstract configuration that was dynamic, not static, but which was made up of the traditional building blocks of the novel (that is, scene, dialogue, character exchange, suspense, and so on) rather than, as Gertrude Stein had done, by having words cancelling out words.

LM: Other than Stein, were there any other writers who were having an impact on your sensibility when you were starting out as a writer?

EW: Ronald Firbank, oddly enough, was and continues to be a writer I admire a lot and who has probably affected my own notions of fiction. There are two

kinds of Ronald Firbank: there's the one who seems to be a later expression of the fin-de-siècle spirit of Oscar Wilde—the campy, humorous, superficial, ornate writer he is usually taken to be. But there is a much more profound and deep, artistic side to Firbank in which he is comparable to Gertrude Stein, as he is a deep explorer of these same questions I've just been talking about. Americans are probably much more likely to see this side of Firbank than are the English, who are so complacent socially that they feel they can dismiss him (just as the French think of Colette as this writer their mother was always reading under the hairdryer, whereas Americans have no preoccupations about her place in society).

LM: Were you aware of the experimental fervor going on around you in the late sixties and seventies, the kind of aesthetic sensibility that was creating postmodernism and which seems relevant to the kinds of unusual structures your fiction favors?

EW: Sure, it was obvious that there was a spirit of experimentalism in the sixties that revolved around figures like Coover, Barthelme, Gass, Wurlitzer. I was reading all those people and thinking about what they were doing. I even proposed a book to Farrar, Straus and Giroux during that period that would have been a study of them. It was an exciting period. Particularly Barthelme had a lot of flair and humor and dash. One of the things I felt, too, was that until then abstraction had always been rather grey. For instance, analytic cubism is grey. There's a totally arbitrary notion that what is abstract is cerebral, and what is cerebral should be grey (maybe because of the phrase "grey matter"). But at that period I was thinking, why can't abstractions be presented colorfully? In *Forgetting Elena* I could play with scarlets and hot pinks. Grimness is usually seen as an automatic bid for seriousness—people always take you *au sérieux* if you have a grim view of things.

LM: Could you talk a bit about the evolution of your style? Despite certain stylistic similarities (the use of the first-person narrator, an emphasis on lyricism in your prose, an eye for the surprising detail), all three of your novels are also very different. Have you been consciously writing in different styles?

EW: I read a remark once by Gide in which he said that he hoped that with each book he would lose the fans he had acquired with the previous one. This is certainly a foolhardy approach, since most critics want a writer to create a product that is easily recognizable. But to me it's more fun to keep exploring. I also remember once reading someone saying that in the twentieth century every serious writer with each book has not only invented a new novel but a new theory of the novel.

SG: Did writing your nonfiction study of gay life in America, *States of Desire*, influence the writing of *A Boy's Own Story*?

EW: Most definitely. In *States of Desire* I was creating myself as a first-person narrator for the first time, and that was something that had a direct bearing on what I was to do in *A Boy's Own Story*. *Forgetting Elena* and *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* were first-person narrators, but I thought of those narrators as being definite "characters" who in no way really resembled me. Obviously you're always using some part of yourself to fashion forth these narrators, but they both struck me as either exotic or funny. The first one, in *Elena*, is meant to be funny and the second exotic. Whereas I think of myself as a fairly straightforward and active person who tends to pursue others and make things

happen (I have a deep anxiety that if I don't make something happen, then no one else will), the boy in *Nocturnes* is exactly the opposite: he is entirely passive, he's small, blond, pretty, and the world takes care of him. I remember once reading something by Rilke is his *Letters to a Young Poet* in which he says: Don't worry, the world is holding its hands beneath you, you won't fall. At the time, I thought, how absurd! The world isn't holding its hands underneath anybody—you must take care of yourself or disaster will be upon you. So in a way, *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* was an experiment in being somebody else, somebody who *does* trust the world, who is passive but seems to attract help and who always seems to land on his feet, somebody who seemed very foreign to my own experience. It was a kind of ventriloquism or acting, an impersonation of someone else. But with *States of Desire* I felt I had finally invented a first-person narrator who was closely related to me, who was me or some version.

The other effect that *States of Desire* had on my fiction writing was a smaller, more technical matter: it taught me how to do quick portraits of people. So I had learned how to characterize people quickly and I had learned how to be me in my work. With *A Boy's Own Story* a sufficient time had gone by since my adolescence that I could write about it from a new, different point of view. Some sort of relationship of attraction, even affection, existed between the "I" (the middle-aged narrator looking back at his adolescent self) and the boy himself—a relationship I call "the pederasty of autobiography."

LM: There's a passage in *Nocturnes* where your narrator says that to label our childhood as adults is probably always a falsification. Wasn't this distrust of using adult words to reconstruct childhood difficult to overcome in writing *A Boy's Own Story*?

EW: Yes, it was, and as a matter of fact I allude to that same notion in *A Boy's Own Story* when I mention that there is always a falsification of early experience by writing about it. On the one hand, you want to tell a story that has some coherence, some style, and some sense of well-roundedness, and on the other you want to present some semblance of what the actuality was. Those impulses pull in different directions.

SG: That sounds like the old truth-beauty relationship ...

EW: Exactly. Truth and beauty are two opposed claims upon a writer at any moment. Beauty is all in favor of making a story that entertains, that's well formed, that's lively, in which there are recognizable causes and effects, in which there are decisive experiences, turning points, crucial scenes—a sequence of events that cohere to the Aristotelian notions of drama. That's what we call beauty. Then there's this other thing that we call truth which is completely elusive: there are no turning points in life, there are very few causes you can ever pinpoint, there are enormous gaps in one's memory, you are not a unitary character nor is your experience unity (in fact, you are an extremely fragmented person who becomes different in almost every situation). Some of these are issues or questions that I tried to expose and dramatize in *Forgetting Elena*. I chose what I thought was an extreme metaphor for this condition: amnesia. But my narrator is an embarrassed amnesiac who doesn't want to admit to anyone that he can't remember who he is, much less who they are; he is constantly molding himself on other people's expectations. He's a skillful faker. An extreme version of any kind of social interaction.

SG: You seem to have a deeply felt ambivalence about the process of molding and self-invention. That is, whereas in *Forgetting Elena* you seem to present this situation ironically and enjoy poking fun at it, in your other books you present the necessity (especially in gay life) of constant self-invention more sympathetically. I sense both derision and sympathy in your attitude, and I'm reminded of the passage in *States of Desire* where you say of gay life that "there is an obligatory existentialism forced on people who must constantly invent themselves."

EW: Writers usually write best about things they feel deeply about but also deeply ambivalent about. For instance, in her essay on camp Susan Sontag said that the only reason she was able to isolate it as a phenomenon was that she felt so deeply ambivalent about it. On the one hand, she, too, liked camp but on the other she felt repelled by the whole aesthetic. Because she was of two minds about it, she was able to write about it with great feeling. In my case, particularly in my late twenties, I became obsessed with the question of sincerity, and this obsession is reflected in *Forgetting Elena*. Piaget talks about the different stages that children go through that get resolved on some higher level; it's not as though they find an answer to a particular question, they just stop asking that question, it's no longer relevant to them. Probably there are different Piaget-stages that go on throughout people's lives; between the ages of twenty-five and thirty people often become obsessed with questions of sincerity and authenticity which later seem juvenile or uninteresting. *Forgetting Elena* was ultimately born out of that obsession, which I no longer feel or which I think needs to be examined on different levels.

LM: You seem to have largely abandoned the use of a heavily ironic tone in your work since *Forgetting Elena*, a tone I take it that gays have often employed as a means of protection, of distancing themselves from painful situations. Has this move away from irony anything to do with the sense you mention in *States of Desire* that "my friends were so ironic that they never knew whether they were serious or not"?

EW: F. R. Leavis said when he was at school there was a group of young men who were ceaselessly ironic, but that they used irony in order to disguise from themselves whether they were truly serious or not about anything. That sort of attitude can be harmful, both personally and artistically. Irony seems to be a very juvenile dodge, and it's one of those modes or themes in modernism that I find utterly tiresome. Another tiresome, perennially avant-garde question dithers over the border between life and art. After all, Pirandello explored that issue to everyone's satisfaction seventy years ago. When is it to end? Is it really interesting? To me the Japanese, who very early on realized this was a dull question, have a much more mature understanding that art is artifice and life is life and a confusion of the two is puerile.

SG: Why did you decide to tell your story as an autobiographical novel in *A Boy's Own Story* rather than as a straight autobiography?

EW: Perhaps an *autobiographie romancée* is more modest? One only wants to read the "real" autobiography of somebody who is interesting or famous, or who is old and has done something with his life. Secondly, by calling the book a novel and thinking about it as a novel, I felt obliged to render fully experiences that one only alludes to in an autobiography. Somebody who is really famous can say, "So in that year I discovered the double helix" or something like that, and everybody knows what that is and he's said enough. Calling a work a novel

places one under the obligation to paint the scene more vividly.

LM: Could you talk a bit about the kinds of changes you made in developing the novel of your life, the nature of the aesthetic choices you made, and so forth?

EW: The most basic change I made for aesthetic reasons was to make the book *more representative*, more normal, less crazy and eccentric than my own life really was. My family is certainly much more bizarre than the family presented in *A Boy's Own Story*. For instance, the boy there is much dimmer, less perceptive and precocious than I think I was at his age, and less sexually aggressive as well. And certainly the character based on my mother is a lot less interesting and complicated than my real mother, who did have that lucid, neurotic side I describe but she is also an expert on mongolism and ran a clinic for the retarded at Cook County Hospital in Chicago; she published extensively on this subject and to this day she is writing monographs in the field. So she was a much more complicated, interesting person than in the novel. Of all the characters, I would say that the father is closest to reality.

LM: The figure of the father is important in all your books, but especially in *Nocturnes* and *A Boy's Own Story*, so much so that we assumed your own relationship to your father has been something you have been coming to grips with in your fiction. Has it been difficult to write about your father?

EW: Sometimes very much so. But especially in *A Boy's Own Story* my father was very present for me because he had just died. Really, it was his death that triggered off my writing that book. Like the character in the book, he smoked cigars, and I remember being in a taxi maybe six months after his death, and the taxi driver was smoking a cigar, and I found myself bursting into tears. I thought to myself, my father frightened everybody and was a big, important, well-known man; but within another twenty years there will be no one alive who even knew him. It struck me very powerfully that he, who was so present and bristling—so that people always felt he was sucking all the air out of the room—now was no more present than this smell of tobacco. So, yes, it was difficult to write about him, difficult not to romanticize, glorify him, make him richer or more powerful, bigger or worse, than he was. In *A Boy's Own Story* I wanted to be very honest, keep him exactly as he was so that he would survive, not to mythologize him.

SG: Whereas in *Nocturnes* the father figure seems a very mythic figure indeed.

EW: He was very much so in *Nocturnes*, but he was only based on certain sides of my real father. There was a kind of Don Juan, playboy side to my father that I obviously built up and made a big thing out of in that book, but there were other models as well.

SG: Any thoughts on why you developed the mythological version before the realistic one?

EW: Sometimes people have to get the mythological aspects of their experiences out of the way first before they can deal with the reality of them. Many gay men have a fantasy about having an affair with their fathers; it seems to be a persistent but seldom mentioned theme, but if you become intimate with gay men you find that many of us have had this fantasy (sometimes it gets transferred to an uncle or an older brother but it tends to stay within the family). In *Nocturnes* the boy gets to play out his fantasy, not with the father but with someone who saves him from his father. The boy in *A Boy's Own Story* has

this persistent fantasy that there will be a wonderful, snowy-haired English lord who will come and save him from his father; something like that actually happens in *Nocturnes*. In a way you could say that *Nocturnes* is a gay fantasy, while *A Boy's Own Story* is a gay reality.

SG: I was struck by the fact that although *A Boy's Own Story* is about growing up gay, the kinds of events that occur are the same sorts of things that all adolescents (including girls) go through: that sense of powerlessness, the compensating fantasies, the painful and exhilarating adolescent eroticism.

EW: This sharing of experience is always a great surprise for a writer: he feels he's writing this very peculiar stuff, and he's invented the most *crazy* thing he can imagine to put down on the page, so that his heart is pounding when he writes it—and that's precisely the passage that people identify with.

SG: The last scene, where the boy betrays that musician, was very powerful, and I especially admired it since it seemed so clear-eyed in its depiction of an ugly mean-spirited act. Since you obviously identified with the boy and since your presentation of him throughout is basically sympathetic, wasn't that a difficult scene for you to write?

EW: I felt both frightened and gleeful when I was writing that scene because I kept asking myself whether or not I was going to do it. I was very aware that the boy was sympathetic, and I knew I would be alienating so many readers by ending the novel that way—especially gay readers, who sometimes still have an apologist's attitude towards gay fiction. There's been a kind of neo-Stalinist aesthetic at work in gay literary circles demanding a "positive role model," whatever that is. To have my boy turn out so creepy seemed to be a way of alienating some gay commissars. Nevertheless I felt that the ending made sense, even from a political point of view. You can't show somebody in a deforming period, like the 1950s in America, and then show him as happy, healthy, the perfect role model. Doesn't it make more sense to show that a deforming period deforms people? I felt that once I had written the end of the book, I had succeeded in presenting a truth about that deformation that would have been missing if I left it out. There is a kind of power-madness in the victim. If you are victimized, you want revenge, and you have these feelings of persecution *and* grandeur. Technically, that last scene was also important because I wanted a way to end the book, which was something of a problem. I still feel that the book is not well formed, that it's too episodic, not satisfying on the level of structure. Having gotten as far as I did, and knowing that the materials I had were more or less what I was stuck with—these shards, these chapters that didn't really flow together or add up to a whole—I very much wanted to give the book a sense of an ending. It occurred to me that having been up till then reflective and seldom reporting direct action or dialogue, that if I suddenly reversed myself and went into a straightforward description of action and used *lots* of dialogue, that it would give a quickening feeling, a sense of shifting into a new key. I also could see that it would be a neat, nasty trick to play on the reader to make him identify with a character who becomes a monster, so that the reader must experience the monster within himself. Because we all do have one.

LM: When you say that you're not satisfied with the structure of *A Boy's Own Story*, doesn't that sense derive from trying to force unshapely reality into a structure it resists?

EW: It's that pull and tug and truth and beauty again. I do know that since *Nocturnes* was almost completely imagined it seems to have a better form because I wasn't distracted by trying to render real experiences, as in *A Boy's Own Story*. I do feel, though, that what *A Boy's Own Story* loses in formal coherence, it gains in vibrancy from the pleasure of describing things that really happened. It's more direct, simple communication, which seemed appropriate to the subject.

LM: People have described your books in musical terms. Do you think that way?

EW: I love music, it's my favorite art, and I like to think that I have a musical sense of composition. Now when I encounter somebody like Kundera, who really does have a musical sense of composition, I realize I don't have one at all. He has a precise and formal sense of structure which has obvious musical analogues: tone row, using certain words that he repeats through the book, repetitions of larger structures, and so on. It's all very organized in that way. I was very impressed with a description of Schoenberg's music (not the later twelve-tone music which was very systematic, but the earlier music of *Pierrot Lunaire*), of which somebody said, "Nobody could go on writing music this way for very long because it required *total* invention from moment to moment." That notion of always being "on," of being a performer who is always pulling this stuff up out of himself, is a very romantic notion of the artist that appeals to me. I never rewrote much when I was working on *Nocturnes* and I only wrote when I felt inspired; there was no regular process, and I would be terrified of writing each chapter. When I read writers' interviews, I'm always struck by the fact that they seem to have these regular hours and they are professional, and they've built up this kind of craft. I've never had any of that feeling. With me I always have the sense that I'm winging it.

SG: But wait a minute: take a scene like the one that opens *Nocturnes*, the one at the strange warehouse. That episode seemed to set up *everything* that followed, including those images of fire and water, light and shadow, what is actual, substantial versus what is illusion, spiritual. When I reread the book, it seemed to me that scene was incredibly *crafted*, deliberate in its intentions. Were you winging it there?

EW: That actually was the first thing I wrote for that book, even though I knew in some way what the book was going to be, where it was headed. The idea of a rather static opening—an opening scene which is nonfunctioning in terms of plot but which acts as an overture or preview of things to come—is something that appeals to me. In fact, I've done it in all three of my novels. Of course, with *Nocturnes* one of the themes is the idea, is this a book about God or is it a book about a lover? In considering the nature of this "You" that the narrator is addressing, the reader is supposed to ask, is this a religious devotional work or is it a book about contemporary sexual devotion? The Baroque era specialized in this confusion (which is one reason I tried to make the book have such a baroque feel to it). If you look at Bernini's statues, they seem to be extremely sensuous objects (everybody giggles about St. Teresa being stabbed in the side by St. Michael), but they're also serene and lofty expressions of religious sentiment. I was always impressed by this doubling of spiritual and carnal love, and I wanted to allude to that throughout the book, starting with the opening scene. The scene takes place in a famous abandoned pier in New York where people could go and have sex; everyone who was gay and lived in New York

recognized the pier because all the glass from the roof was broken and it was all over the ground like diamonds, and everyone would go there every night; there were various levels, it was all dilapidated and dangerous, partly because there were always pickpockets there. But it was always spooky and beautiful. Anyway, this sex pier, which I describe as a church, seemed to me a good expression of this double message that I was trying to suggest throughout the book about sexual and divine love. In the book are buried lots of references to Sufi beliefs (I even took one poem by a Sufi poet that I translated into English and buried into the last chapter). In the first chapter there's a sestina, and in the middle of the book there's an imitation of a baroque French sonnet, an anonymous poem called "Aux yeux de Mme Beaufort."

LM: Obviously most readers won't recognize those references ...

EW: No, they're developed only for those who care to follow such things. I admire Nabokov's method in this regard: when you read his books you're never *stopped* by a literary reference unless you're specifically aware of it; you never even know that he's made one. I don't like the other kind of game playing, where you're awed and puzzled by the author's erudition, constantly stopped by it. I don't want to intimidate my readers in that way.

LM: When you said just now that you knew where *Nocturnes* was heading, is that usually the case? Do you, for example, ever work from an outline or specific notes?

EW: No, although I do at least vaguely know where I want to head (or at least somewhere about a third of the way through the book I know). As I said, I try to write from inspiration a lot of the times, which can be a wasteful and frightening experience at times. But I usually know what the main issue of a book will be, or the kind of music I want to present.

SG: One of the things I respond to in your fiction (and this is difficult to formulate clearly) is the *texture* of your books, the richness of your prose, the surprise of your *details*. I assume that this texture is one of the things you're consciously aiming for.

EW: Yes, creating and sharing those details with my readers is one of the things I most enjoy about writing. I see it almost as an energy exchange—the writer works and stores up this honey in a cell, and then the reader taps it and the honey flows. A metaphor is a way of recapturing or reimagining experience. Nabokov is the real master of this. But Nabokov had something that nobody else has had—a gift for metaphor and detail *plus* a sense of pace, of speed. You can't stop reading him, there's that wonderful forward motion to his works that's exhilarating, which I also find in Stendhal at times. The absence of this is what is most distressing in a lot of American fiction now.

LM: In *States of Desire*, after you've told your psychiatrist some of your inner desires, he says to you, "Your desires are banal." Your reply is, "Of course, desire is always banal." And yet every one of your books is about desire in a basic sense. Is this banality one of the challenges for you as an artist—finding ways to overcome it, to turn it into something interesting, even beautiful?

EW: Nabokov usually writes about fairly banal, melodramatic subjects. Henry James's plots make good movies because they really *are* movies, cheap movies, too; they're usually about sex and money and power. So both Nabokov and James take this very familiar, cheap material and then do all their wonderful

things with it. That's a nice trick. Readers will have patience with formal innovation when they are reading about something they care about, like sex or money. That's why the Bloom sections of *Ulysses* are more successful than the Dedalus sections—because most of us know what it would be like to be Bloom, with all his banalities, but very few of us know what it would be like to be Stephen. And so there are complex explorations of Bloom's consciousness involving formal experimentation but the experimentalism doesn't put us off because we know what it would be like to have bought kidneys at the butcher's while your wife is still sleeping. Successful artists can always find ways to interest us in the familiar.

SG: The familiarity of sex would seem to be one of the biggest challenges ...

EW: Sex scenes are very difficult indeed. For instance, with that little sex scene between Kevin and the narrator in *A Boy's Own Story*, the twenty pages that precede it are written in a very melancholy, elegiac spirit, with a full range of adult vocabulary, very little reported dialogue, and complex syntax for rendering adolescent experience. I was trying to pull out all the stops. Then suddenly there's the sex scene, which is composed solely of these little dialogue exchanges. This is a case where I was very aware of the powerful effect that structuring a scene in a certain way can have. Dialogue can be very powerful: it has the effect of a close-up if it's used with restraint. Tolstoy recognized this in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, where he doesn't use any dialogue at all until the first moment that Ivan Ilych admits that he might be dying and he says to his man servant, "Rub my legs."

SG: Since sex itself is basically a repetitive act, it would seem to be especially important to use language freshly, to start over again, since it's an area in which clichés seem to emerge naturally.

EW: I don't think it's so much that. Since the act is repetitive, the language tends to be too in pornography, but that's not true about all sexual writing. Rather, I'd say that sex and pornography are two separate things that are in no way related to each other. Some people need pornography in order to feel sexual, and so they will look at dirty movies when they are having sex with a partner, or say dirty words to a partner, or in their own mind they will play a dirty movie or a dirty record. I think men tend to be pornographic in this way more than women, while women tend to be more romantic—but romance itself is "pornographic" in that it too is a language of desire which is highly codified and highly stylized, which is brought to the experience rather than being extracted from it. When most writers write about sexuality, they want to excite the reader rather than awaken in the reader a sense of recognition—so they use the pornographic language, whereas a description of sexual encounters as they *really happen* is always a description of a comic situation, and therefore not sexy in the sense that it awakens sexual desire in the reader.

SG: Do you get negative responses from people because your books aren't pornographic? When most readers hear that you write "gay novels," I suspect they expect certain things that your books don't deliver.

EW: It's interesting how many gay readers are frustrated by how little explicit sexuality there is in my writing because most gay books published in the fifties and sixties were published specifically because there was a pornographic market for them—there was a specific category of gay pornographic fiction, cheap paperbacks sold under the counters. I know a lot of readers, especially

those gay readers from that generation, are disappointed when they find out my books aren't just a series of jerk-off scenes. Again, approaching this issue from a technical standpoint, I think that if you deal exclusively with sex in fiction, you inevitably end up only with an episodic structure.

LM: Maybe because Sinda and I are avowed adolescent types, we both really responded to your comment in *States of Desire* about gay life extending the possibilities of being an adolescent into one's thirties, forties, fifties, and even beyond—where “adolescent” means not having a fixed viewpoint, continuing to open yourself to experience, refusing to settle into familiar realities.

EW: I'm intrigued by the idea of neoteny—the view that animals, as they move up the evolutionary ladder, retain into adulthood certain physical characteristics of infancy. So that, for instance, adult human beings look more like baby human beings than adult chimps look like baby chimps. In other words, human adults have glabrous skin, large heads, and in other ways we have a childish look not present in other animals, which have profound physiological differences between the way they look as babies and as adults. I like to use that as a metaphor for human behavior in gay culture today. It's also known by anthropologists that the longer you can perpetuate childhood, the longer you can perpetuate one specific, wonderful quality of childhood, which is play, innocent learning, learning without consequences, the ability to experiment with various new behaviors.

SG: You mentioned Firkbank and Stein, among others, as writers you admired and who had some influence on your own work. Who are the contemporary writers you admire or feel affinities with?

EW: There's Coleman Dowell, whom I admire very much and about whom I've written a long essay that appeared in *Christopher Street* and in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*. I admire him because he has a power that I don't have at all, a compulsive readability, a real love of narration. He's one of those people who tells story after story, and when he starts telling a story you can't stop listening and he can't stop telling it. Whereas I can never tell a story, I have no interest in stories. But I admire that ability because it's the central gift in fiction. Since I don't have that gift I've been forced to seek it out in other writers. I find that I often respond to writers who don't write like me in the least—I love Chekhov and Knut Hamsun, for example, and we don't have much in common as writers. Another contemporary writer I greatly admire is a Yugoslav writer named Danilo Kiš. He's had several books published in English: *Garden, Ashes, A Tomb for Boris Davidovitch*, and now one that will appear this summer called *Hourglass*. William Gass is another writer I respond to and so is Harold Brodkey. Of course, the greatest American writer, now or ever, is Thomas Pynchon; he's amazing. But after Pynchon, for me the best American writer is James Merrill. He is very fluent, and his ability to combine a high-society, comic tone with a confessional, ardent tone or a magisterial epic voice or the lyric voice of the nature poet is very wonderful. There's another writer, W. M. Spackman who wrote *An Armful of Warm Girl*. He's a very elegant writer who writes everything as though it were 1930s sculpture—picture a slender girl being pulled along by a borzoi on a leash, the whole thing windswept and deco: elegant social comedy, entirely charming and entirely sexist.

SG: You've taught creative writing—do you find yourself trying to get your students to write like you?

EW: There are two ways of looking at literature: one is to feel that there is one great Platonic novel in the sky that we're all striving towards. I find that view to be very deadening, finally, and certainly it's a terrible view for a teacher or a critic to hold. The other view is that each person has a chance to write his or her own book in his or her own voice; maturing as an artist occurs when you find your own voice, when you write something that *only you* could have written. That's the view I have.

LM: In *States of Desire* you make the statement that certain aspects of New York City life—drugs, for instance—had “freed us from the tyranny of beauty.” But in *A Boy's Own Story* you make the remark that “Beauty is the highest good.” Aren't those two notions incompatible?

EW: I don't see them as being incompatible, although I think we have a very ambiguous relationship toward physical beauty in our culture. Most people respond to it quite strongly, and want to possess it, or destroy it if they can't have it. I found that in the gay community for a while everyone was so tuned into physical beauty that they tended to worship it alone. But what happened with the clone culture of the seventies was that, since now anybody could have a beautiful body—all you had to do was go to the gym and work out—people no longer had to depend on physical beauty alone to make an impact on people, there were other forms of beauty to explore. But I also feel it's important for an artist to be honest about the tremendous glamor and impact of physical beauty. A beautiful person acknowledges in the flesh what the artist is struggling to represent in his work. As far as drugs are concerned, they were a way of allowing people to see beauty in what was not conventionally labeled beauty. LSD and other hallucinogens permitted people to discover a closeness on a human level. There had been something stale and snobbish about gay life in New York City that was seasoned and swept clean by drugs. I feel rather strange about sounding like an apologist for drugs because, by and large, they've probably caused more harm than good, but one cannot deny the good they did. That is, there are certain drugged states that, once you've experienced them and if they haven't completely fried your brains, you'll remember in the future—a sense of a pantheistic unity with other people, the realization that there's a brotherhood of man, something deep and loveable about other people, even if they're funny looking or whatever. That's a sense that artists also need to recognize, acknowledge.

Edmund White: The Art of Fiction 105

Jordan Elgrably / 1988

Originally published in the *Paris Review*, issue 108 (Fall 1988). Copyright © 1988 by the *Paris Review*, used by permission of the Wylie Agency and Jordan Elgrably (jordanelgrably.com).

I first met Edmund White following his move from New York to Paris in 1983. His novel *A Boy's Own Story* (1982) had been recommended to me by Odile Hellier, in whose American bookshop, The Village Voice, White was scheduled to read. On the evening of the reading, the upstairs wing of Hellier's store was packed with curious newcomers. White's generous and genial personality, as well as his affective reading of his autobiographical novel—the first in a tetralogy dealing with gay experience in America—won White many new readers and inspired me to ask him to sit for an interview for the *International Herald Tribune* in April 1984.

Over the next four years, White and I ran into each other often at various Paris gatherings, or at *Village Voice* literary evenings, and I meanwhile followed his essays and reviews in the *New York Review of Books*, the *New York Times Book Review*, and *American Vogue*, where he is a contributing editor. White's previous novels, *Forgetting Elena* and *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, and *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America*, had already identified him as a fresh, original voice in American fiction as well as one of the country's most eloquent representatives of the gay community, but it was with *A Boy's Own Story* that he acquired a wide international readership. French critics praised his Proustian sensibility and compared his prose to that of Henry James; in England the novel sold well over one hundred thousand copies and began White's regular contributions to the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Sunday Times*, among others. His fourth novel, *Caracole*, was described by the British magazine *Time Out* as "something to revel in: elegant, fabulous, almost sublime." Earlier this year, White's second autobiographical novel in the tetralogy, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, appeared. At present, White is at work on a biography of Jean Genet.

Our interview took place on a Sunday afternoon in mid-April 1988. We met in White's apartment, a three-room walk-up in a seventeenth-century building that looks directly out onto the church of St.-Louis-en-L'Île. Edmund White's persona is very much that of his nameless autobiographical narrator in *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*—a man who yearns for beauty and love, yet who often lives at the edge of the society he so painstakingly observes, his highest good the truth of the imagination.

Jordan Elgrably: You've been variously congratulated by your peers as one of America's outstanding prose writers today, as a master of language and imagination. How does the kind of encouragement you need now differ from when you were just starting out?

Edmund White: I feel I'm getting all the encouragement I need. I almost feel spoiled. I wish I were more disciplined and taking better advantage of the time I have now.

JE: Are literature grants such as the Guggenheim, which enabled you to settle and write in Paris, healthy for an author's sense of independence? Does the writer remain nonpartisan to the politics of the supporting institution?

EW: Oh yes, there are no strings attached. You don't have to do anything but write and you don't feel compromised in any way. And often one may have no idea what those politics are.

JE: Do you think there are enough grants available to writers who are just starting out?

EW: There ought to be more grants that go to people in their late twenties and early thirties. That's a crucial age, although it's very hard to judge who is worth supporting and who is not. Looking back on my own life, I see that was the period when I was closest to giving up as a novelist and when I most needed some encouragement. I didn't get anything published until I was thirty-three and yet I'd written five novels and six or seven plays. The plays, I should point out, were dreadful.

JE: How were you making a living?

EW: I was working for Time-Life Books from 1962 to 1970, as a staff writer, and after that I was a journalist. Eventually I became an editor at the *Saturday Review* and *Horizon*.

JE: These positions didn't allow you to think of yourself as a writer?

EW: No, because a journalist and novelist are not quite the same thing. I was writing all the time and I was considered a good journalist but I had no idea if I could write a novel. Part of my problem as a young writer was that I was too much a New Yorker, always second-guessing the "market." I became so discouraged that I decided to write something that would please me alone—that became my sole criterion. And that was when I wrote *Forgetting Elena*, the first novel I got published. In my courses later I always forbade my writing students to discuss in class the commercial side of publishing. I wanted to save them the time I'd lost; I wanted them to be serious, artistic, free of all constraints. I believe it was Schiller who said that the only time a human being is free is when he or she makes a work of art; if that's true, then art is sacred and shouldn't be compromised by mere ambition.

JE: You taught writing at Yale, Columbia, and Johns Hopkins University. What do you, as a confirmed novelist, acquire from teaching experience?

EW: These are positions that are offered to you once you've already published a few books. I began teaching in 1977. In the beginning it served to clarify my thinking about my own methods. Then I used teaching to improve my work. For instance, I saw I was a weak plotter and so I would talk a lot in class about how to write strong plots, and how to analyze other people's novels and stories from that angle. That helped me to some degree; I was teaching myself. After a point, however, you become too immersed in other people's work to be able to think about your own, and it seems almost vulgar to write. You're surrounded by all of these struggling egos and it seems sort of impertinent. And yet being able to work out some of my own ideas about fiction was admittedly a useful process. I estimate there is a period of seven or eight years when you can do it, but then you burn out and I think you should stop for a few years before starting again.

JE: Would you elaborate?

EW: When I was teaching, some of my students were much better educated than I, and so I felt I really had to struggle to keep up with them and be worthy of their level of seriousness. I was also aware of just how much money they were spending in tuition and felt I had to give them their money's worth at every moment. I tended to overprepare, or let's say to prepare very, very carefully, for which I think they were grateful. But it's true that at the same time I was pursuing my own interests. Certain writers interested me, for instance Proust, whom I'd read many times in my life though never with enough care. I taught a course in Proust, which was a way of making myself read him with great attention. In the same way, I taught a course in Pynchon. Though I had admired *Gravity's Rainbow*, I'd never been able to get through it. I think it is a great but boring book.

JE: In terms of lack of action?

EW: Of suspense.

JE: Is this inability to write fiction while teaching similar to the unwillingness to read novels while you're writing one?

EW: Not in my case. I enjoy reading novels while I write. First, to steal ideas from other writers, particularly the classic ones—they remind you of just how good you have to be to be any good at all. It's very easy for one's standards to slip. I mean that I'm not an especially anguished writer; I tend to like what I write and am possibly satisfied too readily. When you finish reading a book like *Lolita* you feel that there's nothing more wonderful in the whole world than writing a novel; you feel challenged and awake and alive, and you have a desire to write with the same keen response to the sensuous world. Nadine Gordimer once said to me she felt that one of the things that goes out of writing as you become more mature is an attention to sensuous detail. I thought that was probably true but a terrible thing if it is true, and I've always tried to guard against what may be an inevitable process by reading some of my touchstone writers who never lost that love of sensuous detail, such as Colette, Nabokov, and Knut Hamsun.

JE: There isn't a fear that a spark of originality might be taken away from you by reading earlier novels?

EW: No, no, I find, for instance, that when Cocteau wrote what I think is one of his best novels, *The Impostor*, he thought he was copying *The Charterhouse of Parma*; or when Raymond Radiguet wrote *Le Bal du Comte d'Orgel*, he thought he was copying *La Princesse de Clèves* by Comtesse de Lafayette—but you could read those two novels and never suspect their antecedents. There are many writers who enjoy seeing their books as a kind of *homage* to an earlier book. And yet very few readers would suspect such a link unless it was explicitly pointed out.

JE: There may also be some truth in the notion that a good novel should have the ingredients to spawn a hundred other good novels, so that a succeeding novelist ought to be able to seize upon the ideas of a predecessor and somehow further them in his own work.

EW: I think there is also this balance between the literary and the human interest in a book, if we can make that distinction. For instance, a novel like *Caracole* maybe errs in the direction of being too literary, without being sufficiently human. I think that *Lolita* is the greatest of all novels because it is

both simultaneously. I mean that for those people who are interested in literature, it makes reference to a whole library of French poetry and fiction—everything from *Carmen* to Arthur Rimbaud. But for those who don't care about literature, they can read the book and be swept up by the strictly human interest of it, by the passions. I think that probably a novel like the one I've just finished, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, is very human in its orientation and may be the kind of book that pleases most readers—it holds a mirror to life; whereas *Caracole*, which is literary and fantastical and not obviously mimetic, has a much smaller readership.

JE: From reading the French reviews of your work, one learns that they consider you very much an author in the European tradition. To what do you attribute this?

EW: I believe they are struck by the echoes of Proust, in both *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* and *A Boy's Own Story*, and I think by that they mean a non-Freudian, psychological analysis written in a nuanced, flowing style. Americans don't necessarily associate that style with Proust; I think we usually attribute it to James, who is much more our figure.

JE: Would you say the European literary tradition differs from its American counterpart more in style and form rather than in content or concerns?

EW: It very much depends on which period you're talking about. I think that the nineteenth century in America is extraordinarily different from the twentieth century. There may be certain preoccupations that are similar, such as the individual versus nature, or the dynamics of male companionship, or the loss of innocence—you could tack those as three concerns that unite the nineteenth with the twentieth century, but those are moral preoccupations. In terms of style, nothing could be more different than the prose of Emerson and, say, Richard Ford, or that of Raymond Carver and Hawthorne.

JE: Isn't this more a question of evolutionary progress in terms of writing technique?

EW: Yes, but style has evolved more rapidly in the States. I would say that there's more uniformity between the styles of Angelo Rinaldi and Proust or even Flaubert than there is between Carver and Hawthorne. Even though Europe witnessed a tremendous upheaval in experimental techniques in the twenties and thirties, namely with the surrealists (and with Joyce in English), that innovative moment has left a rather small effect, and now most French novelists, and English novelists, are writing rather like their nineteenth-century antecedents. Barbara Pym, for instance, writes like Jane Austen, and Jonathan Raban or Alan Hollinghurst like E. M. Forster—just to name some of the writers I admire. Obviously there are some changes; for instance there is a great deal more interiority in contemporary fiction than in nineteenth-century fiction, and a lot less incident, or plot. And there is far more sexuality now than then, and so on. But English novelists continue to be primarily concerned with analyzing character in terms of social class. American novelists are not at all interested in that.

JE: Aren't American novelists quite often less political in a worldly sense than Europeans?

EW: Yes. I think a novelist like Milan Kundera, for instance, could not exist in America. A person of the stature of Kundera, let's say somebody like William

Gass, doesn't have a political analysis of society so much as a mythic one. A novel like *Omensetter's Luck* by Gass, which I consider a masterpiece, is a big, mythic, Faulknerian, highly poetic view of an almost Jungian archetype, and this is an American tendency, one which starts with the greatest of all American novels, *Moby-Dick*. It's a quasi-religious view of society, whereas in Europe, a novelist such as Kundera is extremely interested in questions of individual authenticity versus political "kitsch," as he would put it.

JE: Not to stray too far from the question of American and European literary counterpoints, it does seem somewhat odd that American novelists rarely work within a vast political framework, particularly when you evaluate US interests and involvements abroad, which have of course escalated since 1945.

EW: I think you have to look at the social conditions under which writers live in the various countries. For instance, in France, writers have often been involved in politics as diplomats or ministers—Paul Claudel was the ambassador to Japan and André Malraux was de Gaulle's minister of culture. Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz were diplomats and García Márquez was a journalist who knew Castro as a friend. Alejo Carpentier was stationed for years in Paris. Most Russian or Middle European writers have *suffered* for their political views—they cannot afford to be indifferent to politics. Now, if you glance at the social situation of most American novelists, you'll see they are professors on small, isolated provincial campuses and the larger world of politics is not part of their experience. If you take someone like Raymond Carver, for instance, he is from a working-class family, he is a man who had a serious drinking problem. Now that he has stopped drinking and is writing very brilliantly, what he writes about is a different kind of social problem; that is, the disenfranchisement of people in America itself. This is a perfectly legitimate concern and one that I think falls within his experience. I can't imagine him writing about the American oppression of people in Vietnam or Nicaragua; it's just not in his bailiwick. Of course there are American novelists who fought in Vietnam and who have written about that. I think the truth is that novelists are not universal legislators of morality, they don't set out to write about *the* most important issues; they write about the ones that have actually touched their lives. I agree with you, however, that there's something very insular about American fiction. So many books are first-person novels that deal with questions of adultery, personal poverty, or misunderstanding between generations—suburban problems.

JE: There is a paradox at work here, I think, because America has become more and more dependent on the outside world. If you took the inkwell of US interests and involvements and spilled it on a map of the world, you would see how it sinks in nearly everywhere. And yet it seems that so many Americans don't want to know that they are no longer protected from the larger scale of things.

EW: Americans do not keep up with world events. It may be partly that people don't travel very much, or it may be a kind of arrogance. Or maybe we should blame the press, which highlights personalities, not issues.

JE: Occasionally one finds foreign words and phrases in your novels, and sometimes the odd word coined by yourself. How do you decide when to employ foreign words or coin new ones and when to remain within "the riches" of the English language?

EW: Actually, the odd thing is that since I moved to France I've probably used fewer foreign words in my fiction. While I was living in America I always had a kind of longing to live in Europe, which expressed itself in such linguistic borrowings. But now that I actually live here I'm so worried about my English becoming too Gallicized that I tend to eliminate French words. Although you think I've made up a lot of words, it's not quite true. I once knew a woman who read books for dictionaries, and she would circle unusual or substandard or odd, variant uses of words; she told me it had been a waste of her time to read my books because the usages were utterly conventional. I think that writers who invent new words, like Joyce, are admirable.

JE: In *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, however, you chose to use the words *malade imaginaire* in reference to a character, instead of *hypochondriac*.

EW: If you say *hypochondriac* it suggests a mild psychiatric problem that should be cured; if you say *malade imaginaire* it suggests a character in a Molière play—a comic figure whom experience will chide.

JE: Can you talk a bit about the writers who most helped to form you as a novelist?

EW: Vladimir Nabokov is my favorite writer, and I like Colette a great deal—I've learned a lot from the way she uses herself as a character in her own books and tantalizes the reader with the question: Is this autobiography or is it fiction? I also love her descriptions of nature and her handling of love. She is greatly underrated in France. I read Knut Hamsun all the time for inspiration, though he's so entirely different from me. Of course, I don't like his later work, when he came under the influence of fascism. But those early novels—*Mysteries*, *Victoria*, *Pan*, and *Hunger*—are beautiful books. I'm drawn to the simple lyricism that runs through his writing. There is not much plot, but intense outbursts of feeling.

JE: And what is it about Nabokov that so moves you?

EW: It wouldn't be his intellectual high jinks, but his passion, his sensuous detail, the wonderful rendering of the physical, visual, material world around us. It's almost a spiritual way he has of describing the world; he makes it so glowing, so mouthwatering, and so precise that you feel it has somehow been irradiated. Writers can use literature as a mirror held up to the world, or they can use writing as a consolation for life (in the sense that literature is preferable to reality). I prefer the second approach, although clearly there has to be a blend of both. If the writing is pure fantasy it doesn't connect to any of our real feelings. But if it's grim realism, that doesn't seem like much of a gift. I think literature should be a gift to the reader, and that gift is an idealization. I don't mean it should be a whitewashing of problems, but something ideally energetic. Ordinary life is *blah*, whereas literature at its best is bristling with energy. Somebody once said Balzac's only fault is that he makes all of his characters into geniuses, like himself. What a wonderful fault!

JE: Which of your American contemporaries do you admire?

EW: I like Robert Coover, John Hawkes, Richard Ford, Carver, Pynchon, Gass, William Gaddis, Robert Ferro, and especially Cynthia Ozick. W. M. Spackman is someone I admire as well. James Merrill is, I think, my favorite living writer at the moment. I feel that his trilogy *The Changing Light at Sandover* is a masterpiece. I've been very involved with that book, following it as each

episode appeared. His entire oeuvre seems to me enormously impressive and, again, imbued with the same kind of lyric quality that Nabokov has. Both of them constantly change register. They go from slang to the most serious or elevated speech, from the medieval language of courtly sentiment to the most recent street talk—a constant movement from the hieratic to the demotic, from the historic to the contemporary. This shift in register seems to be the genius of English, going back to Shakespeare, but it is not at all the genius of French, which is more concentrated and uniform in diction.

JE: Principally, what have you read in French since you moved to Paris?

EW: Chateaubriand's *Les Mémoires d'outre tombe*, Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme*, and, in more recent literature, Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*, which I admired tremendously. I think her style is ideally suited for early childhood memories because it is so spare and fragmentary. Most people writing about childhood tend to inflate what are actually very small memories into a continuous and rapturous narrative. She doesn't do that. Her refusal to part from the facts, the actual phenomenological memories of experience is careful and honest ... I've been reading both Richard Ford and Raymond Carver, whom I admire immensely—Ford, I think, may be one of the most important new American fiction writers to emerge in the last five or six years. And of course, I've been reading a lot of Jean Genet for the biography I'm writing of him, and then other writers whom he read and liked, such as Racine and Jouhandeau. And I do quite a bit of book reviewing as well. So, I do read a good amount of fiction.

JE: Do you find yourself reading more slowly now than, say, twenty or thirty years ago, when you were just beginning to write? Are you reading from a craftsman's point of view, or are you still able to appreciate reading fiction as a kind of nostalgic literary enterprise?

EW: I get quite caught up in books, but rarely in French because I'm always too aware of reading another language. But I do often get caught up in English-language novels. I don't find that technical awareness stands in the way of pleasure; it can even make that pleasure more piercing if you're constantly excited by the writer's technique.

JE: In *A Boy's Own Story*, your nameless narrator "awakened to the idea that a great world existed in which things happened and people changed, took risks ..." What kinds of risks do you feel you take as a writer?

EW: Writers are always taking risks economically. You don't have a retirement plan, you don't have health insurance necessarily, and little in the way of personal savings. In other words, if you were to become ill tomorrow or if you were to write two or three bad or unpopular books, you'd be very, very poor. Nevertheless I have always made it a point of honor to write as though I had a million dollars; that is, I try to write in the most original way I know how, and that feels like a risk each time you do it. André Gide said that with each book you write you should lose the admirers you gained with the previous one.

JE: One takes the risk of changing audiences, or styles?

EW: Yes, I think so. In the nineteenth century people wrote rapidly and they wrote a great deal; books were almost like chapters in people's writing today. Then there wasn't any question of changing the basic style, or basic premises. In the twentieth century the serious writer strives to evolve. Someone once said

that each good novel should also advance a theory of the novel.

JE: There seem to be two distinct voices in your fiction, with *Nocturnes* and *Forgetting Elena* falling into a kind of baroque, rather dreamlike reality, while *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* are in that register of possible autobiography you admire in the novels of Nabokov and Colette. (*Caracole*, however, is somewhere between them and in a genre of its own.) How many convincing voices or styles can a novelist hope to master, and might they reflect the nature of his or her worldly concerns?

EW: *Caracole* was consciously about society and the individual's place within it. In *The Beautiful Room* I was interested in showing the puritanical oppression of sexual freedom. In any event, those two books have a specific political concern. If a writer keeps changing his style, he could be accused of dilettantism—or he could be defended as someone who resists the sort of packaging designed for quick product recognition and smooth consumption. Is a stylistically unpredictable writer a luxury product—or is he refusing to be a product? More subjectively, my mercurial literary personality reflects a general feeling of unreality. Like the narrator in *Forgetting Elena*, I'm an amnesiac—a guilty, not an innocent amnesiac. I keep feeling I've accomplished nothing, never written a “real” novel. Today, when so many of my friends are dead or dying of AIDS, that feeling of unreality has been heightened. People say we should seize the day, but just *one* day turns out to be too cold (or slippery) to hold.

JE: Until *Caracole* you wrote principally of gay experience. Why did you make the departure into “straight” fiction?

EW: The writing of *Caracole* coincided with my coming to Europe. In New York, without even really noticing it, I had come to live an almost exclusively gay life (except for my teaching). I had gay friends, I dealt with gay shopkeepers, I lived in a gay community in Greenwich Village, and I was interested mainly in gay politics and read a lot of gay literature. My reference group, as a sociologist would say, was gay. But, when I came to Europe, partly because there isn't such a strong gay ghetto in Paris, I began to lead a more ordinary life. *Caracole* represents that renewed participation in society. I suppose that the idea for the novel came from reading, many years ago, eighteenth-century French pornographic fiction—the novels of Crébillon *films*—which struck me as very odd. The heterosexual characters seemed so gay in that they were interested only in promiscuity and conquest. War was constantly a metaphor for love, and there was a highly structured and artificial nature to courtship. Sex was seen as sport, time killer, self-expression, pleasure, and war—whereas in nineteenth-century conventional heterosexual fiction it's seen as an urge toward companionship, affection, familial values, or lust. Crébillon showed me how one could write about heterosexual sex in a very different way.

JE: Did you receive any reaction from heterosexual readers either confirming or disavowing some of the experiences they read about?

EW: A number of heterosexual men told me they found it arousing. An English novelist said that he'd gotten very embarrassed reading *Caracole* in a train. A reviewer from *L'Express* was reportedly confused and disappointed to learn I was gay.

JE: Let's go back to your early years as a novelist. You mentioned you'd written several novels but couldn't get any of them published until you were thirty-

three. What difficulties were you experiencing?

EW: I was writing gay books well before gay liberation and before there was a recognized gay reading public. One actually existed, although no publisher was aware of it. There was also a tremendous amount of self-repression among gay editors. A gay editor would turn down a gay book because if he admitted to liking it he would have to defend it in an editorial meeting, and that might lead other people to suspect *he* was gay.

JE: What became of all those unpublished novels?

EW: They are gathering dust. But I quarry them for other books I write. They are a source for a lot of information, particularly about the fifties and sixties. For instance, *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room* contain material from previous novels. I could not employ much of the actual language because I've come along as a stylist, but the material serves to refresh my memory of the years I was dealing with, when I was in my twenties and early thirties. It's very easy to rewrite the past in your mind and to assume that in the sixties you had the same sophistication—let's say politically—that you might have had in the seventies. In the sixties we harbored utopian notions that were extremely naive. I feel that it's hard to recreate that naïveté unless you're faced with documents from the period.

JE: Why does one write a book like *A Boy's Own Story*—as a coming to grips with the ghosts of childhood once and for all, a sort of final self-analysis of one's rudiments?

EW: I think you're making it sound a little more pragmatic than it is, but there is something crucial about the relationship in that book, for me, between the narrator and the younger self. I call it the pederasty of autobiography; the older self actually loves the younger self in a way the younger self never could have felt or accepted at the time. There is a kind of lapse in time in self-approval. One is filled with self-loathing at sixteen but when one is forty one can look back with this kind of retrospective affection at the younger self—which is very curative.

JE: From *Nocturnes*: "We label the feelings of our childhood with the names we learn as adults and brightly, confidently refer to that old 'anguish' or 'despair' or 'elation.' The confidence of liars. For those words meant nothing to us then; what we lacked as children was precisely the power to designate and dismiss, and when we describe the emotions of one age with the language of another, we are merely applying stickers to locked trunks, calling 'fragile' or 'perishable' contents that, even were we to view them again, would be unrecognizable." Is this representative of the writer's responsibility to "tell the truth"? What precisely does that mean?

EW: Piaget makes a very good case for the fact that the language, and even the concepts and the thoughts we have as adults, really don't fit with childhood experience. There is a radical discontinuity between childhood experience and adult experience. We complain of a kind of amnesia, that we don't recall much of our early childhood, and Freud of course said that this was because we were repressing painful or guilty desires. But Piaget argues this couldn't be true, because otherwise we would forget only those things that were painful but remember everything else—which is clearly not the case. We have an almost blanket amnesia, and Piaget argues that the terms in which we experienced our childhood are incommensurable with the terms in which we now think as

adults. It's as though it's an entirely different language we knew and lost. Therefore I feel that any writer who is writing about childhood, as an adult, is bound to falsify experience, *but* one of the things you try to do is to find poetic approximation; an elusive and impossible task. It is like trying to pick up blobs of mercury with tweezers—you can't do it. You nevertheless attempt to find various metaphorical ways of surprising that experience. I think you oftentimes feel *it's there*, but you can't get at it, and that's the archaeology of writing about childhood.

JE: In *Caracole* you write, "Children never question what happens around them," although in *A Boy's Own Story* your narrator is quite inquisitive. Thus one's childhood becomes a kind of myth so that as an adult one is more dependent on imagination than memory.

EW: Yes, I think that our notion of what we experienced as children is highly infected by whatever is the prevailing philosophy of childhood. In other words, if you'd asked somebody in the seventeenth century to write a story of his childhood, he would have perceived it as a rough draft, an inferior version, of maturity—or as comical, deformed. Then in the nineteenth century the child becomes the angel, innocent and pure, who must be protected. And then in the twentieth century, with Freud, the child becomes a monster seething with vice and lust.

JE: Might we say that a true novel, when it is the fruit of the creative subconscious, is a kind of rendering of one's past as a mythology?

EW: It's curious that if you take certain facts from your childhood and perceive them in a kind of glow, and arrange them in a certain sequence, it will not only move you and your mother and sister, but also people who don't know you. It's very odd how that works and I'm not quite sure why it works. I'm always struck by it because I've *invented* childhoods for imaginary characters which seem to have a lot less impact on readers than my actual childhood has when I recount it.

JE: You underwent psychoanalysis for a time. Can you talk about that experience, and how it did or didn't help you to write?

EW: I started psychoanalysis very much as the narrator does in *A Boy's Own Story*, at the early age of fifteen, and I would say my early experiences with it were almost entirely destructive. However, towards the end of the twelve years I spent in therapy over a period of some twenty years, I did finally find a therapist who I felt approved of me in some fundamental way, and who was himself a writer. He was quite helpful to me as a writer, yet in ways that would make you smile. For instance, when I had a writer's block and I went to him, he said to me, "Well, it's very hard to write and you're feeling very frightened of it. It's simply a question of courage. You must find some courage within you and go home and write." I found that very useful advice coming from him, though I don't think I would've accepted it from anyone else. This kind of primitive advice that you could get from your grandmother turns out to be the most useful "insight" the analyst offers. And perhaps self-acceptance leads to tolerance, just as self-knowledge leads to insights into other people. I've had people say to me, not so much after reading my fiction as a book like *States of Desire*, that they felt I was a compassionate writer—I don't really know what they mean by that, as I can be pretty arrogant as a commentator on other people. But I suspect what they mean is that I'm able to put myself in other

people's shoes and see things from their point of view without being too judgmental early on in the process.

JE: I was wondering if the analysis might not be destructive in the sense that you begin to feel too much guilt, and find yourself in a kind of endless process of exorcism when that guilt may be merely a minor aspect of your personality.

EW: I would say that writing, in its own way, is a rival to therapy. You should recognize that literature is a separate province. It has its own rules. It cannot be simply an embodiment of Freud's notions on human nature, for otherwise it will soon seem hopelessly dated and hollow.

JE: In *A Boy's Own Story* your character reflects: "I see that what I wanted was to be loved by men and to love them back but not be a homosexual.... It was men, not women, who struck me as foreign and desirable." When did you eventually conceive of your sexuality as healthy and acceptable?

EW: Well, I was actually in the Stonewall riot, the harbinger of gay liberation in New York in 1969. The riot itself I considered a rather silly event at the time; it seemed more Dada than Bastille, a kind of romp. But I participated in that and then was active from the very beginning in gay liberation. We had these gatherings which were patterned after women's and ultimately, I think, Maoist consciousness-raising sessions. Whether or not our sessions accomplished anything for society, they were certainly useful to all of us as a tool for changing ourselves.

JE: But what did you have to change? The fact that there was nothing to deny or repress?

EW: You see, many of us began by thinking that we were basically heterosexual except for this funny little thing, this sexual habit we had somehow picked up carelessly—but we weren't homosexuals as people. Even the notion of a homosexual culture would have seemed comical or ridiculous to us, certainly horrifying. We would have wanted to confine our disease to the smallest possible part of our life, to our sexual behavior and nothing else.

JE: You've said previously that you're writing for gays and straights. But do you think of yourself as a gay spokesman?

EW: It was a political act for me to sign *The Joy of Gay Sex* at the time. The publisher could not have cared less, but for me it was a big act of coming out. Charles Silverstein, my coauthor, and I were both aware that we would be addressing a lot of people and so in that sense we were spokesmen. We always pictured our ideal reader as someone who thought he was the only homosexual in the world. *States of Desire* was an attempt to see the varieties of gay experience and also to suggest the enormous range of gay life to straight and gay people—to show that gays aren't just hairdressers, they're also petroleum engineers and ranchers and short-order cooks. Once I'd written *States of Desire* I felt it was important to show one gay life in particular depth, rather than all of these lives in a shorthand version. *A Boy's Own Story* and its sequel, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, grew out of that.

JE: "The world is governed by a minority, the sexually active" is one of the boy's rationales. What do you mean by designating the sexually active as a minority?

EW: If you look at most people in the subway or on the street they're either sick

or old or ugly or crippled or crazy. That's "most" people, and they can't get sex and sex is hard to buy; it's expensive. There are a lot of Arab men in Paris, for instance, who would do anything to get a sex partner. There are a lot of black men from the Antilles, you know, who are too poor to afford sex, except occasionally, with a prostitute.

JE: Do you see the range, the reactions, the emotions in heterosexual love and homosexual love to be approximately similar?

EW: I think there is an equally complex gamut but the two experiences are not coincident. You can't say all the things a straight woman goes through in her courtship, marriage, and divorce are the same as a gay man experiences in meeting another man, living with him, and breaking up with him. They're not the same emotions, they don't occur in the same sequence nor do they have the same social repercussions. But there are enough similarities to permit us to speak to each other. When a straight man breaks up with his girlfriend, the break is often decisive; it's very hard for them to move from the end of their affair into an ongoing friendship. However, I would say that many—if not most—gay men who break up continue to be best friends. And they may even continue to live together. They may enter into a period of rivalry during which each of them tries to meet somebody new first. When that phase wears out their friendship gets mellower and better. This is something which seems unthinkable to most straight people; they don't know how we can do it, but there is a great deal of comradeship that lies under the discourse of homosexual love. There is a discourse of gay friendship, and then there is a kind of male/male friendship which straight men know about, and there is also a discourse of love that straight men have with women. The idea that those discourses can come together in one relationship, and that when the love ends the friendship can continue, astonishes many outsiders.

JE: Can you discuss your work process? When do you sit down to write, and what do you do to warm up?

EW: Oh, it's very tormented. I try to write in the morning, and I write in longhand, and I write in very beautiful notebooks [*White displays a couple of hardbound notebooks filled with thick, hand-laid paper*] and with very beautiful pens. I just write away, and then ... This is a first go at it, and then I start crossing out, and it gets crazier and crazier, with inserts and so on. Finally, two or three years of this go by and then one day I call in a typist. I dictate the entire book to her or him. The typist is a sort of editor in that he or she will tell me what is really terrible and what's good, or what's inconsistent and doesn't make sense. I get together a whole version this way and then I stew over it some more. Eventually my editor reads it, and then he tells me to change things, and it goes on like that. If I write a page a day, I'm lucky. But I write less. And months go by without my writing at all, and I get very crazy when I write! Sick, physically.

JE: You are more neurotic when you write than when you don't?

EW: It's a very uncomfortable process; I don't like it all.

JE: In everyday life, what sort of things spark off your imagination?

EW: Other works of art, as I've said, challenge me. Then, when I'm writing, I find that my brain begins to store information in a different way than it usually does. That is, I'm out looking for things that I need, and I will grab them

anywhere. And there's a magic which any writer can tell you about: the world provides you with just the information you need, it seems, just when you need it.

JE: Has it happened that you've been blocked and you go to sleep and upon waking the following morning you've been given what you needed?

EW: Yes, but my plots are rather primitive, so that is not a worry. I'm more concerned with controlling the mood. I find that when I'm writing well, I have a real zest for detail, for description. When I'm not writing well, I can't think of anything to say, and there is a lackluster, mechanical quality to the writing. But, basically, when the sentences get longer and more ornate, and there's more and more sensuous detail, that's when I'm writing happily or well. When the sentences get shorter, clearer, more pure or classical, then I'm not enjoying the book and neither is the reader.

JE: You seem to be more a creature of inspiration than habit, which counters the dictum many writers have about getting up every morning and writing for several hours a day, come what may.

EW: Writers say two things that strike me as nonsense. One is that you must follow an absolute schedule every day. If you're not writing well, why continue it? I just don't think this grinding away is useful. The other thing they say: I write because I must. Well, I have never felt that, and I doubt most of them do either. I think they are mouthing a cliché. I don't think most people write because they must; perhaps economically they must, but spiritually? I wonder. I think many writers would be perfectly happy to lay down their pens and never write again if they could maintain their prestige, professorship, and PEN membership.

JE: In *A Boy's Own Story* you describe the character as having imaginary playmates, but he thinks, "And yet I didn't really like my imaginary playmates precisely because they were so irritatingly vague and unreal." Does it ever seem to you while writing or reading that fiction is vague and unreal?

EW: Yes, and the stewing I'm talking about, getting ready to write, the thinking about writing and trying to find your way, all of that is meant to find a way of doing a scene that is full of energy, so that it has conviction, a sharp outline, progression, and intensity. You should find that your writing overcomes the besetting feeling of vagueness and ennui that is characteristic of everyday life.

JE: In your *New York Review of Books* essay on Nabokov you wrote, "Many writers proceed by creating characters who are parodies of themselves or near misses or fun-house distortions, or they distribute their own characteristics across a cast of characters, and some especially like to dramatize their conflicts and indecisions by assigning them to different personages." How do you find yourself adapting yourself to your characters, or do they perhaps adapt themselves to you?

EW: Well, I do two things. One is that I pattern a lot of my characters on people I know, but there is a strictly imaginary element which creeps in after I start writing. I begin by writing a fairly close portrait of somebody I know, but then the character begins to seem real to me in his own right. If I'm stuck at some point I try to find something in my own experience that I can use, even if the character is going through something I've never experienced. I have had my writing students read Stanislavsky, and of course his whole method requires the

actor to find real-life experiences to draw on for even the most improbable and wild scenes that he must portray. I think the writer must do something like that, and most writers go through that process without thinking about it. What Stanislavsky says is that you cannot hope to recuperate an emotion by going for it directly. What you can do is to reconstruct the original sensuous details of the room in which you were sitting, what you were eating, what you were wearing, whether it was hot or cold; and *if* you get all those things right, *then* the emotion will come flooding back, of its own. I think that is an important exercise for writers. People always ask: What do you teach in creative writing? People insist: There's nothing to teach. Well, of course, there *is* something you can teach; you teach people to find ways of tapping their own emotions.

JE: When you're writing, do you look more towards innovation, or towards tradition?

EW: Originality is important, and one of the dangers of creative writing classes, for instance, or any critical approach to literature, is that it under-emphasizes originality. After all, a professor of literature is trying to find a tradition, and influences, which can be traced. People would rather talk about Poe as the typically American genius than as the total kind of lunar nut that he really is. There is nothing typical about Poe; he's from the moon.

JE: How do you go about being original?

EW: Well, of course, if you ask this question of somebody in a *Paris Review* interview, he will say, "You do it by being yourself, by being true to your own vision." I think that is somewhat true. As you gain confidence as a writer, you learn to spot your own funny ways of looking at things, and you learn how to notate them—because at first, of course, it's very elusive. You've never seen your vision before, so you wouldn't know how to put it down on paper, and it might not occur to you that the vision is something suitable for writing about. After you have acquired a certain amount of technique and confidence, you learn how to notate these rather passing, elusive thoughts. A young woman came up to me once after a reading and said, "I love what you do," and I said, "What do I do?" and she said, "You completely jump over the important plot points, and then develop the minor things that nobody else would think to develop." I decided to profit from her intelligence.

JE: In *A Boy's Own Story* you evaluated your readers as "eccentric," as they were "willing to make so much out of so little." Is it not the writer, ostensibly, who must make so much out of so little?

EW: In *Nocturnes*, I thought I had been almost perverse in how few clues I gave to the reader, and I was *amazed* by how much was made of so little. That is, if you go back to the text, there are only the strangest little traces of slime that indicate where the snails once crawled, just a few phosphorescent, glimmering paths, and I was astonished by just how much intelligent readers were able to get out of this, and to reconstruct more or less the same picture I'd intended. It is a rather eccentric enterprise on both the part of the reader and the writer, but technically it is the reader who must be willing to take all these faint clues and reconstruct them into a novel. This is very different from the process of reading a nineteenth-century novel, where all the work has been done for you.

JE: The *non-dit*, the art of ellipsis, is certainly within the European tradition, and more noticeably so, I think, in postwar fiction. Isn't this not only a result of

an increasing sophistication in readers, but also a reflection of the mass media, which tends to condense everything for quick consumption?

EW: It is precisely film that has promoted the use and understanding of ellipsis. In the nineteenth-century novel, the reader was oriented for a full chapter before the action began. A film, however, will begin with one man chasing another and they're desperately racing over rooftops, and then suddenly they're speeding away in cars and—who are these people, and what are they doing? You don't care; you're suddenly seized by the action. Poetry also proceeds in an elliptical way. Anyone who's studied English in America, for example, has read T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens, not to mention John Ashbery, and such a reader is used to suspending a demand for instant intelligibility. They're willing to wade into line after line of language without quite knowing where they are or what's happening or what it all means.

JE: I was wondering how your life has significantly changed in the move from New York to Paris. Has it been good for your writing?

EW: French people are extremely formal and they don't call you up all the time, whereas in America total strangers look you up in the phone book and want you to read their nine-hundred-page manuscript.

JE: What sort of notions do you have of what a writer's life should be like?

EW: I wish I were more at home with writing. I can go a year or two or three without picking up my pen and I'm perfectly content. The minute I have to write I become neurotic and grouchy and ill; I become like a little wet, drenched bird, and I put a blanket over my shoulders and I try to write and I hate myself and I hate what I'm writing. Writing depends upon a fairly quiet life, whereas I am a sociable person. I think every writer goes back and forth on this question; it's a constant struggle to find the right balance between solitude and society and I don't think anyone ever does. I find it reassuring to read the complaints of Chekhov: "My country house is full of people, they never leave me alone; if only they would go away I could be a good writer." He's writing this close to the end of his life.

JE: Originally you moved to Paris to be in Europe for a year or two, but five years have passed. What keeps you here in Paris?

EW: I think mainly the quality of life is so attractive, and there is still a certain degree of exoticism for me here. And just from a practical point of view, I can make my living here as an American journalist writing for American magazines about Europe. In New York everything is done for a motive, and people are even quite frank about it, whereas here people get together simply to have fun with each other. In a way it's more like small-town America, which I like, and not like big-city life. I think New York is a city for ambition. In Paris people cultivate social life as an art form; in New York people cultivate it as a form of self-advancement.

JE: Do you find journalism as pleasingly painful as writing fiction? What inspired you to turn to biography and to work on Genet?

EW: In both journalism and biography the *assignment* is fairly clear, which is never true of fiction. Moreover, in journalism and biography one is obliged to study, observe, record, whereas in fiction one is left to one's own melancholic devices.

JE: Social life has been very important in your fiction, especially in *Caracole*. Aren't people too often victims of what is fashionable, whether it be a social theory or a political ideology, and isn't that moment as subject to change as the kinds of clothing they wear?

EW: I would say a novelist's proper job is to be sensitive to the way things look. I agree with Conrad that fiction is primarily a visual medium, and that there is something very concrete and valuable and eternal in any accurate description of the way things look. No one would ever require fiction to be totally divorced from its period; in fact, most people believe, and I believe, that the more it's anchored in a specific locale, period, and milieu, the more universal it is. This is quite different from, for instance, espousing a Freudian view of sexuality and imposing that in a rigid way on your characters, and then ten years later a Foucauldian view—because then you get a *roman à thèse*. After all, fiction writers are not professional thinkers.

JE: *Caracole* treats fashion and *la société mondaine* in a context of political upheaval. Does fashion, for you, influence politics in any perceivable way? Why was the leitmotif of fashionable society so important to you in that novel?

EW: I was trying to show a society in which the conquerors were less evolved than their subjects and in which they were even intimidated by their victims. This is a situation that can be observed in life. Oscar Wilde unnerved his jailers. Wit, style, and intelligence can outweigh, or at least hold at bay, brute power or wealth. The Chinese intimidated their Manchurian conquerors, just as the Nazis, upon conquering Paris, became respectful of French culture and were eager to win the approval of the subjugated. Of course, Cesare Borgia respected Urbino so much he destroyed it.

JE: In terms of the kinds of ideas which are a writer's staple, there is something in *Forgetting Elena* I'd like to take issue with. You write, "We all know that human emotions are banal ..." Is this meant to provoke the reader or, for you, is it axiomatic?

EW: When I say human emotions are banal I mean that they are familiar, we all have them; if we didn't, we wouldn't be able to write novels that each of us could read and understand. Originality in writing is in the presentation of those emotions, or even in their occlusion—the way in which feelings are stopped or diverted or disguised.

JE: Writing, then, with originality should prevent the banal from creeping into the tone of the novel.

EW: There is a tendency to talk about the Platonic novel as though there were but one novel we're all striving to write, an ideal, perfect novel that is outside time, outside history, outside any particular cultural tradition—an eternal, floating, and perfect book. An opposed point of view, which is the one I hold, is that each person has it within him to write a novel unlike everybody else's. If you're a teacher this is very important, because you either have a normative notion of the novel, and you struggle to make all writers ascribe to your notion of what *the* great novel should be, or you have a pluralistic notion, whereby each person should write a novel unlike all others.

JE: Is writing a way of rendering the banal beautiful?

EW: Or making the banal strange. There is a term that comes up in Russian formalist criticism called *defamiliarization*. It's a way of talking about the events

of everyday life (in Tolstoy, Natasha's first ball or her first opera, for example) and making them utterly weird because they are described by an innocent or inexperienced person. Good fiction often takes the banal around us and defamiliarizes it.

JE: Writing from an unfamiliar point of view must be one of the great challenges of a novelist. In *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, your character at one point during his university days says he thinks the Buddhists were right in their belief that the self is an illusion, although as a writer he reacts to the individuality of everyone he meets. "I was potentially everything or nothing. I could wake up one morning gay or straight ..." I thought this seemed like a desire to convince yourself that Edmund White, writer, transcends Edmund White, self; transcends his class, race, and sexuality.

EW: You're right.

JE: Yet there are two contradictory points of view at work here.

EW: I'm convinced that *the self* is an illusion, and that actually all we are consists of several piles, or, as the Buddhists call them, *skandhas*, of associations and memories and so on, that the way to enlightenment is to dissolve the illusion of unity and return all these elements to their original constituents, thereby ridding oneself of the notion of identity. Although all that appeals to me philosophically, as a novelist I don't believe it. As a novelist I believe there is a kind of smell that's very distinctive about each living creature, and I enjoy being a sort of sketch artist, like a sidewalk artist, who tries to catch a likeness—and I somehow manage to believe that there are likenesses, and that they do tell you something about people.

JE: In *A Boy's Own Story* you write, "It seemed to me then that beauty is the highest good, the one thing we all want to be or to have or, failing that, destroy." One is immediately reminded of Yukio Mishima, who made youth and beauty into a cult and ultimately committed hara-kiri at the age of forty-five, already an old man by his standards. You are in the vicinity of that age now. What do you see as the "highest good"?

EW: Are you suggesting I make the supreme sacrifice? Artists should be honest about the tremendous glamor and impact of physical beauty. It is not fair that it should be so important, since so few people possess it, but, in fact, beauty is a glimpse of the beautiful. A beautiful person embodies in her or his flesh what an artist is struggling to represent in his work. But a writer shouldn't have too many answers. Barthes has a phrase in which he suggests that the artist is like Orpheus leading Eurydice out of the underworld. Everything is fine, the novel follows along behind the novelist, until he looks back ...

An Interview with Edmund White

Kay Bonetti / 1989

From the *Missouri Review* 13.2 (1990): 89–110. Reprinted by permission of American Audio Prose Library, Inc. All rights reserved.

Edmund White's critically acclaimed fiction has earned him a number of honors and awards during his career. He has twice received the Hopwood Awards (1961 and 1962), Ingram Merrill grants (1973 and 1978), was a Guggenheim fellow in 1983, and in that same year received the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters award for fiction. His major works include five novels, *Forgetting Elena*, *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, *A Boy's Own Story*, *Caracole*, and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, as well as a short story collection, *The Darker Proof*, and two plays, *The Blue Boy in Black* and *Argument for a Myth*. He is a frequent contributor of articles and reviews to periodicals, as well. After being based in Paris for a number of years, Mr. White has returned to join the faculty at Brown University, where he currently teaches.

This interview was conducted by Kay Bonetti, director of the American Audio Prose Library series, on June 2, 1989, at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

Kay Bonetti: Mr. White, can you fill us in on some background about yourself? Do *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* follow your own chronology?

Edmund White: The books fairly reflect where I was and what I was doing. I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. My parents got divorced when I was seven and my mother began to move from city to city while my father remained in Cincinnati. I was sent to a boarding school in Michigan, near Detroit, a school called Cranbrook, which appears as Eton in my books.

KB: And you went to the University of Michigan?

EW: I studied Chinese there, and when I graduated I moved to New York and worked for Time-Life Books from 1962 to 1970. Then I moved to Rome for a year, and when I came back, I became a freelance writer and editor, then worked briefly for *Saturday Review* and *Horizon*. I started teaching in the mid-seventies, first at Yale, then at Johns Hopkins, finally at Columbia and New York University. In 1981 I was the executive director of the New York Institute for the Humanities, which is an organization of smart people attached to New York University. Then in 1983, I moved to France, where I've been living ever since. Beginning in spring, 1990, I will be teaching at Brown University, where I've just been named a professor of English with tenure.

KB: There's a story in *The Darker Proof* about a couple that move to Paris in an oblique response to the gay community and AIDS. Did you move to Paris for similar reasons?

EW: In a way I gave some of the events of my life to those characters, but the reasons were different. In my case, I won a Guggenheim, which allowed me to go for one year. I worked for *Vogue* and other Condé Nast magazines as a

journalist, so that allowed me to stay on. I could stay forever I suppose. I have a nice apartment and I make a decent living as a freelance American journalist writing from Paris.

KB: Then why are you coming back to teaching?

EW: I like teaching. I like the idea of a secure position. I'm positive for AIDS, and the statistics are rather grim, but if by some chance I do go on living I would like to have a retirement plan. I support my mother now, and if I weren't there, she would really be penniless.

KB: Does your fiction sustain you economically?

EW: If I weren't such a spendthrift and if I didn't have other people to support—my mother's not the only one—I could live very well from my fiction, but I'm a terrible spendthrift. I like to travel, and that takes money.

KB: Is the narrator's job in *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* similar to your job at Time-Life Books?

EW: Absolutely. In the sixties, which was the heyday of direct-mail sales of books, we were vastly overstaffed and the books made enormous amounts of money. I was accepted in a writer's trainee program where I learned lots of useful journalistic things—to change, edit, rewrite. We were so encouraged to say everything was the best, the biggest, the most, that it gave me a permanent horror of overstatement, which I think is also a useful tool for a serious writer. But I stayed too long. When I was thirty I thought, "If I continue here, I'll be here the rest of my life." So I just quit, took my profit-sharing, which was seven thousand dollars, a lot of money in 1970, and moved to Rome, where I lived for a year.

KB: Were you working on fiction at that time?

EW: I wasn't working on anything. I was just being a lazy bum. I write very little. I can go a year or even two years without blinking.

KB: Yet you've put out quite a body of work.

EW: Yes, but I write quickly when I write. Most writers write too much, they work too much, they live too little, and they anguish too much. Especially American writers, who seem to feel guilty about being writers at all. It doesn't seem like a real job to them. In order to justify their existence in their own eyes, or in their friends' and family's eyes, they feel they must sit in an office and write eight hours a day. I don't think anybody writes well after two hours a day—really one—and anyway I tend to be a very old-fashioned writer who writes from inspiration.

KB: During the years at Time-Life when did you write?

EW: At night. After work. I wrote many, many plays and they were all very, very bad. The writing was dry, voices talking in a void, endless chattering dialogue. Then I wrote three or four novels, and they were all very bad. I think it's because I worked too hard in my twenties that I now don't believe in working hard.

KB: Is that what you tell your students?

EW: I do. Of course everybody's rhythms are different, but I do think that people should approach the page with a certain fear and trembling and a feeling

that it's an important encounter. The problem with student writers is not that they write too little, but that they write too much. They crank it out. The ones who enjoy writing enjoy it because they usually have rather neurotic needs to write. It's a real psychological defense, but unfortunately that kind of compulsive writing, though it can sometimes be absolutely gripping can also be extremely dull. It's an experience that only the writer is having, not the reader. Writers should have a kind of wary distaste for the page, a feeling that when you engage with it, you should really be doing something that's interesting. That's compressed. That's beautiful.

KB: You're in Washington, DC, tonight to receive an award and give a lecture. Can you tell us a bit about that?

EW: It's the first Bill Whitehead award, given by a group of gay people and lesbians in publishing called the Publishing Triangle. They have three or four hundred members and they've only just started. Bill Whitehead was a friend and my editor at E. P. Dutton for several years, and he freelanced the editing of *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* after he'd become ill and retired. Before he died of AIDS he suggested the topic of the book I'm working on now, a biography of Jean Genet.

I'm going to be talking about gay liberation and what that's meant in terms of gay publishing. This is the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, which was the first time gay people, when faced with arrest during a bar raid, didn't run away into the night. They stayed behind and fought with the cops over a period of about three days. I participated in the riot, and it was a very exciting moment in my own life. It seems fitting that a publishing group should be giving its first award on the anniversary of that important occasion, even though the gay publishing movement did not begin right away.

One important book was published in 1971, called *Homosexual*, by Dennis Altman, but it really wasn't until 1978 that three gay novels came out: Larry Kramer's *Faggots*; *Dancer from the Dance*, by Andrew Holleran; and my *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*. Those three books gave the impression of a new wave, of a new movement coming along. Especially the first two. Mine was probably the least important of those three, as a publishing event.

KB: How do you place the books by John Rechy, and Gore Vidal, and James Baldwin, and others that came along earlier?

EW: They're all very important. Especially Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* and John Rechy's *City of Night*, in the sixties. The difference between the so-called gay writers like me and those earlier writers is that there is a tremendous network now of gay and lesbian bookshops throughout the United States with an enormous mail order business. It's a highly packaged, self-conscious, self-declared culture. Those guys back then were writing about rather lonely individuals combating society. They were isolated by the nature of things politically, and their position in publishing was always anomalous.

KB: Do you see yourself as a writer who happens to be gay and deals with gay subject matter or as a gay writer?

EW: It depends which country I'm in when somebody asks me. In France there is no such thing as a "gay writer" because there is no gay ghetto. Gays are so well integrated that nobody makes a fuss over his sexual orientation. In the United States we have nothing but ghettos. It's astonishing for a European to walk into an American bookshop and see books categorized by women's studies,

gay studies, children's books. Literary fiction as such represents a tiny part of any particular bookshop, and even that small percentage is drifting more and more toward popular fiction. It all seems minimalist and regional and confessional.

KB: I'm thinking as we talk that "gay literature" is more ghettoized than these other literatures.

EW: *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* was number one on the best-seller list in England when it came out in hard cover last year. Here it would never be on any list. In England, I am a judge of the Booker Prize. Here I would never be asked to judge the Pulitzer. *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* came out first in England, then in Australia and New Zealand and only finally in the States. In those other countries I was interviewed by the major newspapers as a real writer who would be of interest to the general public, but when I arrived in America, the only people who were willing to interview me represented handouts distributed free in gay bars. In England I'm a famous writer, in America I'm a kind of funny ghettoized marginal writer. It's a peculiar experience.

KB: Do you see yourself as writing primarily for a gay audience?

EW: In my first few books I thought first of the general reader. With *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* I was more aware of writing for a gay reader primarily and then for general readers afterwards, because of AIDS, I think. In big cities, gay people have lost up to three quarters of their friends, which is an extraordinary experience for somebody who's not old to have to go through. Most gay people know they are HIV positive, which means that they have about a 50 percent chance of being dead within two years. It's an experience which gives an immediacy to your writing. That's something I tried to deal with in *The Darker Proof*, a collection of short stories that I wrote with Adam Mars-Jones, a very good young gay writer in England. We thought that AIDS had been treated too much from the point of view of experts, usually heterosexual, and discussed as though it were a kind of objective scientific condition, rather than an anguish to be lived through. We wanted to show the human side of this experience. We chose the story as a form, rather than the novel, because the novel has an inevitable trajectory to it. That is, you begin healthy and end sick and dead. We wanted to get into and out of the subject matter in a more angular and less predictable way.

KB: I read that *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* is part of a tetralogy. The idea of a writer being able to hold that much material in his head amazes me.

EW: Well, you can't claim that you know every last little thing, but the broad axes are clear. It's partly because I live my life as though it were a novel. As I'm experiencing it I see it in novelistic terms.

KB: Now what do you mean by that? We're told that life is chaos. Art is discipline and order.

EW: Yes, but I think everyone looks for the order in his or her own life. A novel is precisely that attempt to find a meaning or order. What is important to me is to find meaning with all the complexity left in. One of the things that makes a lot of new American fiction not very interesting is that though the books are shapely, they are shapely at the expense of complication. I like things to be complex.

KB: *A Boy's Own Story* is basically straight-on, as is *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* compared to the lush style of *Forgetting Elena* and *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* and *Caracole*. Any comments on that difference?

EW: In *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* I dealt with my youth in a rather fantastic way with an immensely rich playboy father who's not at all like my fairly dumpy and dour midwestern father. I dealt with some of the feelings of loneliness that I had as a child, some of my first longings for escape and sex and whatnot. All of that was in *Nocturnes* but given to an invented character, somebody who was small and blond and beautiful, whereas I am large and dark and not beautiful. It's as though I peeled away the fantasy layer, in a style that was extremely ornate and appropriate to that particular vision. Then I was ready to deal with the painful reality of my youth in a more direct way. If my goal now was to tell the truth, I wasn't going to disguise it with a style that was very rhetorical.

KB: Are there any parts of *A Boy's Own Story* that serve as an example of how reshaping "real experience" can fit the needs of the book?

EW: Of course the chronology itself—the real experiences were scattered over long periods of time, but I tend to group them in the book and shape them and simplify them. I wanted to have a boy who seemed believable, slightly shy, rather sympathetic and awkward. In real life I was much more self-assured. I was a very successful student, well liked by the other kids, and wildly promiscuous sexually. Between the ages of twelve and sixteen I had hundreds of sexual partners.

KB: In secret or openly?

EW: I don't think it was really secretive. Most people knew that I was gay, but I didn't realize that. Thomas McGuane was in school with me, and he mentions in one of his interviews that he always knew I was gay and so did all the other boys. They thought it was amusing and it didn't bother them at all. Tom makes a brief appearance in one of my books, you know, but I won't give away his alias.

KB: Are most of your characters based on real people, or do you often make them up?

EW: Sometimes I'll take a character like Tex, whom I actually knew when I was twelve, thirteen, and revivify my memories by grafting on memories of somebody who's been more recently in my life.

KB: In the epilogue to *States of Desire* you say that you tend to examine people and individuals with a sociological eye as opposed to a psychological eye. Were you just talking about *States of Desire* or do you think that applies to you as a fiction writer, too?

EW: I think it's true of me as a fiction writer, but also as a biographer. For instance, in the book I'm working on now about Jean Genet, what's most interesting to me is to think of him as a child of the welfare system, a person who was in reform school and then in the army. Looking at the shaping power of these major institutions of French life excites me much more than wondering about his possible Oedipal feelings. I don't believe in psychoanalytic motivations of that sort. I believe that we're shaped by our class position. In my own case my father was a small entrepreneur who made a lot of money and then lost most of it during the time when small businessmen were being

superseded by big corporations. That had an enormous impact on the way I perceived the world. When my mother was married to my father, she was well-to-do, a kind of society matron. After the divorce she was declassed and basically poor, and I along with her. I shuttled between living with my mother and sister in one room in a hotel to my father's house where there were ten bedrooms. I would spend my last five dollars as a tip for the maid, you know. I was sent to debutante balls by my father, but never with the right clothes. I was between two worlds socially. That probably created anxiety in me, but from a positive point of view, it made me more observant of society than a person who is either purely poor or purely rich would have been.

KB: I was struck by the psychological versus sociological question because after reading *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, the conclusion I came to as to why the narrator is gay seems to be the standard absent-father explanation.

EW: At least intellectually I reject the idea of there being any explanation of homosexuality. Just as there is no explanation of heterosexuality, and no one looks for one, so once you begin to look for an explanation of homosexuality, you're already involved in a medical discourse. It's true that I had an absent father and a domineering mother, but my father, when he was present, was extremely domineering too. He was not the usual feeble father that homosexuals are supposed to have. Whether that made me homosexual I have no way of knowing, and I certainly didn't choose those elements in order to illustrate a theory. I chose those elements because they were the ones that happened to have been allotted to me.

KB: If you read *Forgetting Elena* in the context of all of your other books, you can see oblique references to a homosexual culture, yet it's not a "gay book." Was that a conscious decision on your part?

EW: No. What happened was I had written a very autobiographical gay book in the sixties and I stole a few passages from it and the title for the book that was only recently published as *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*. That early book was very long, very self-analytical, very uncritical. It went to twenty-five publishers and was rejected by everybody. One reason it was rejected was because it was about a middle-class homosexual, and I think in the sixties, before gay liberation, publishers were prepared to publish books like those by Rechy or Jean Genet or William Burroughs about freaky people, drug-takers, pimps, prostitutes, marginal gay people. Such characters were colorful, they were strange, and they were certainly not you, dear reader. But it was more threatening to write about a person who was really quite like the presumably middle-class reader, except that he happened to be gay. Having had that book, which I believed in at the time, rejected by so many publishers, I thought, "Oh, the hell with it. No one's ever going to publish me. I'm going to write something purely for myself." So I wrote *Forgetting Elena* because it reflected my own taste in a way that nothing I had written up to then did. The idea of writing about a culture that had a surface democracy, but an actual hidden hierarchy, and where morality had been replaced by esthetics, where people no longer troubled themselves about what was good, but only about what was beautiful, fascinated me. It seemed to be true of how a certain group of highly privileged gay men were living in the seventies.

KB: Yet homosexuality is never overtly mentioned or referred to in that novel.

EW: There's very little that's explicit at all in that book. It's implicit.

KB: *Forgetting Elena* also ties into a theme that runs throughout your work, the position the homosexual is put into by the world of having to invent his identity because within the system there is no role model.

EW: All my books are about initiation into a society. I don't seem to be able to get beyond that as a theme. Although perhaps in recent stories I have begun to tackle other subjects. In *Caracole* I did deal with that initiation from both the point of view of the boy who's being initiated, Gabriel, and from the point of view of the adults who are doing the initiating. It's a painful process on both sides.

KB: Gabriel is a figure that recurs in your work, essentially an amnesiac because he has no frame of reference for where he is and what's going on. He and Angelica are feral. They're strays, eating fried bread while their mysterious enormous mother drinks in the bedroom. Gabriel has no idea what they are doing to him until he finds himself locked in that blackened room in the cage.

EW: I suppose these extreme experiences that I like to put my characters through dramatize a feeling that we all undergo, maybe in less evident forms. Everyone models his responses on the other person's cues, and social life is a kind of theatrical reciprocity and a constant improvisation. The self is a much more fluid thing than we imagine. If a psychiatrist nods while a patient is saying certain things, the patient will talk more about that subject with more enthusiasm. Whereas if the psychiatrist frowns, the patient will become uneasy and talk less about it. You can shape and mold behavior by these Skinnerian techniques.

At the time that I wrote *Caracole*, I was also under the influence of the ideas of Michel Foucault, the French philosopher. I'm sure I didn't understand his ideas very well because I'm not really intelligent enough to, but what I gathered was that there are these large social codes that transect and shape all of our lives, and that the individual is only a locus where these lines of force cross. With Gabriel and Angelica I wanted to show two children who were as close to a state of nature—that is uncoded—as possible. They are brought to the city, and there they are very consciously and elaborately scripted with the ideas of our society, the codes, the laws of behavior, and so on.

KB: You have said that the unity of personality is a "useful illusion" for a novelist. Could you sort that out for me? What is meant by "unity of personality"?

EW: Like the narrator in *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* and *A Boy's Own Story*, as a young person I read Max Muller's *Sacred Books of the East*. One of the Buddhist ideas that seemed very true to me is that the "I," the self, the unifying principal that holds this collection of attributes together, is an illusion. What we really are is just a collection of random psychological states, predispositions, emotions, sentiments, and so on, not to mention bodily organs, more like a pile of objects than an actual unity of self. Buddhists feel that the most useful thing a person can do to escape pain and rebirth and suffering is to return the various elements to their origins, separate them out. Although I believe that philosophically, it's not a very easy way to write a novel. What makes a novel seem vivid to a reader is bright and easily recognizable characters.

KB: The narrator of *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* not only rejects the notion of

unity of person but also says that he's come to distrust ideas: "every enthusiasm if genuinely embraced turns into folly or fanaticism." Some critics have taken you to task for that, but I wonder if the confusion might be in how people understand "idea."

EW: What I like about fiction is that it shows events as history does, but they are shaped by certain principles, certain ideas, but only ideas that are well implanted into actual experiences. They're always concrete and contextual. When William Carlos Williams says, "No ideas but in things," that is something I would agree with, and I think most writers would. The philosophical novelist, like Thomas Mann, is someone I tend to loathe and the very concrete novelist who has very few ideas, like Colette, is someone I tend to admire.

KB: Yet you refer to yourself as being a very opinionated person. Now what is the difference between being opinionated and having ideas?

EW: An essayist is someone who has thought about a subject deeply and knows what he thinks and reflects that in an essay. A novelist is somebody who has very divided feelings, but both sides of those feelings are held very strongly on particular questions. Fiction is finding which issues obsess you, but those obsessional issues are usually unresolved problems rather than neatly typed out position papers.

KB: I'm interested to know how at this point in your life you feel about the "baggy grownups" that the narrator talks about in *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, especially in light of the homosexual community's response to AIDS. That response seems contrary to the attention to youth and physical beauty, the dread of growing old described in your books.

EW: The generation that came out and was liberated through Stonewall twenty years ago is now in its late forties. When AIDS came along, a lot of gays in leadership positions suddenly had a whole new set of problems to deal with. It's true that there's been an extraordinary amount of discipline and courage and dignity in the way the gay community has responded to AIDS. Once the viral nature of AIDS was understood and the means of transmission were fully clear, which was not until 1984, then the gay community made a very rapid change to safe sex behaviors, and if you think how hard it is to change sexual patterns, it's quite remarkable that people have been able to show this degree of coherence, discipline, and versatility. So, yes, I agree with all these things. On the other hand though, I don't regret the stand I appear to be taking in my books, in favor of youth and beauty, because art is about beauty, and young people are more beautiful than old people. I respond to physical beauty, and I agree with the Platonic notion that physical beauty, at least in the mind of the perceiver, is close to spiritual beauty.

KB: Many readers have pointed out that one of the things you learn from reading an Edmund White novel is how alike gay men and straight men are, and how similar the dynamics of couples. Yet in the heterosexual world, the perception is that men become more handsome as they age, more vivid and more interesting, and women don't. How do you account for that?

EW: I think almost all the differences can be accounted for by saying that the homosexual world is one in which you have basically male attitudes interacting with other male attitudes. In other words you are getting a kind of a laboratory-pure sample of how men act when they are both the subject and the object of desire. Just as lesbianism represents the laboratory-pure sample of how women

would be if they weren't interacting with men. There was a study a few years ago of straight couples, lesbian couples, and gay couples, and they found that if you took a certain age group, the gay male couples were having sex three times a week, the straight couples were having sex twice a week and the lesbian couples were having sex once a week. So you can really see heterosexuality as a compromise between female and male psychology. In the same way, I think that women have been socialized to admire power, and older men tend to be richer and more powerful than younger men. Men have been socialized to admire a kind of flashy, youthful beauty that has a high status as an object. Thus the gay youth cult really has nothing to do with anything mysterious and unique to the gay community. All it has to do with is the nature of male socialization versus the nature of female socialization.

KB: At what point in your life did you shake off the self-loathing about your homosexuality that you write so fully about in your two autobiographical novels, *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*?

EW: A big turning point was when I decided to sign my name to *The Joy of Gay Sex*. It was a way of committing myself to gay life and to becoming a "gay writer." Another turning point came in my early thirties, when instead of choosing a straight woman therapist as I had oftentimes done before with the idea that I would eventually be able to go straight, I chose a gay male therapist, accepting the fact that I was probably going to stay gay and male and that I simply wanted to become better adapted to that position in life. I must say that AIDS reawakened and reactivated some of the long-buried feeling I had of self-loathing, and I think it has for many gay men. We live in a sex-phobic society, one that doesn't approve of pleasure in general, and of sex in particular. Something that seems a scourge directed towards people because of their sexual behavior certainly can't help—especially for a Puritanical society like ours—reawakening feelings of self-loathing that I think can be resolved but never extirpated.

KB: Your books deal with love as passion, as obsession, and as an illness, yet love takes on a deeper and different dimension in concert with death and grief in *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*.

EW: A lot of my own unresolved childhood and adolescent feelings of wanting to actually have sex with my father and live with him as a lover were reactivated in the writing of this book. It was an extraordinarily unhappy period of my life. In order to support my nephew and his girlfriend, I was writing college textbooks, including a thousand-page history of the United States, which I worked on every day—the whole thing had to be done in a year. I thought, "Well, I'll never write another word of fiction at this rate"—my expenses had gone from about ten thousand dollars a year to about forty thousand dollars a year because I suddenly had these two kids to send to private schools and so on.

Then John Ashbery told me that he'd been going to a Jungian psychiatrist who was supposed to help writers, and she suggested that he stay in bed and write longhand for half an hour every morning. I don't think he followed that advice, but I did. That's how I wrote that whole book. I wrote it out of a desire to find some small thing for myself, some small place in my life for myself and it was that little half hour in bed in the morning.

KB: Quite a bit of criticism about this book picks up on the "I and thou," the philosophical and the theological implications.

EW: I was interested in writing a book that would be Baroque in the literal sense of the word. The Baroque period was one when physical and spiritual love were mixed up with each other. It's hard to tell with the statues of Bernini whether Saint Theresa is having an orgasm or a vision. It's hard to tell whether certain poems addressed to God are ecstatic or visionary. I was also interested in the Sufi poets, and Saint John of the Cross. The original edition included a comment by Mary Gordon, the Catholic writer, who said that she felt that this book was a reinvention of devotional literature. I was quite pleased that she said that because I did want to suggest that this kind of wild, unreciprocated passion that I'd been talking about and the soul's longing for God are similar emotions. They are both emotions that lead you away from life and the world, that are life-denying in a sense.

KB: The resolution seems to confirm that notion, yet it's the most ecstatically sensual and sensory book that you have written.

EW: It's funny because it's one of those books that I feel goes beyond me. I know when I wrote the last chapter especially, I never felt quite so released as a writer, as though everything was available to me and I could touch on so many different things. I think I was really more interested simply in creating patterns which I knew were drenched with meaning than I was in sorting out what those meanings would be. It's as though you are flying blind, without signals, but aware that later maybe you'll understand it all. That old idea that the artist is a flute being played on by divine breath is a good metaphor for the puzzlement that I oftentimes feel when I'm writing, a kind of sureness about technique, but an unsureness about what it all is going to be interpreted to mean.

KB: Do you see yourself as an American writer or a European writer?

EW: I don't know. When I'm in Europe, I feel like I'm an American, and when I'm in America I feel like a European. Stendhal complained of Byron that he wanted the nobles to treat him like a poet and the poets to treat him like a noble. There's a way that you can waffle on this and have a kind of international schizophrenia, but I think there's a rich way in which you can use it if you're honest with yourself. *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* and "Running on Empty" are the most American things I've ever written. They are rather simple, straightforward, and seem to take a pleasure in the Americanness of America, and both of those I wrote in Paris. When I move back here, I don't know whether I'll be feeling as nostalgic for Paris or whether I'll have a kind of new and ecstatic enthusiasm for America. I imagine what I'll have is both an ecstatic and a critical response to America. That should be interesting.

Paris Interview with Edmund White

Dawn-Michelle Baude / 1991

From *Paris Voice*, September 1, 1991, <http://parisvoice.com/paris-interview-with-edmund-white/>. Reprinted by permission.

Throughout his career, expatriate writer Edmund White has brought a sensual richness and intellectual rigor to the printed page. From his 1973 debut as the thirty-three-year-old novelist of the Nabokov-praised masterpiece *Forgetting Elena*, to the recently edited 1991 edition of the Faber & Faber anthology of short gay fiction, Edmund White has exerted a considerable influence in international literary circles. Published widely in England, America, and France, White has taught at Columbia and Yale, and in 1983 was the recipient of a Guggenheim grant. He is currently on staff at Brown University and is back in Paris completing a colossal five-year project—a critical biography of Jean Genet. White speaks to the *Paris Voice* of his life and work.

Paris Voice: How has living in Paris affected your writing?

Edmund White: I came here in 1982 and I stayed because Paris is a wonderful place to work and because it's quiet. People leave you alone here, so you have more time to yourself. It's rainy—perfect reading and writing weather. I don't think Paris is a great disco or staying-up-all-night city. For that, I'd rather be in New York.

PV: What has French culture contributed to your work? For example, I noticed in your earliest novels references to French history and French words. Have you always had this interest?

EW: I think I always had a dream of coming to France, and being here has given me a kind of "independence." For instance, if you're a writer, it's nice to have your books come out in two or three countries—in my case, those three would be England, France, and America. What happens is that the same book, like *Caracole*, will bomb out in America, do quite well in England, and get nice reviews here and not sell any copies. The same passages that will be singled out for being over-the-top in England will be praised in France and ignored in America. You begin to realize what can be attributed to cultural differences and what is a question of personal taste, which gives you a kind of independence toward your work, an overview. The Americans, for example, like my autobiographical fiction, and they don't like the fancy novels, like *Caracole* or *Forgetting Elena*. With the French, just the opposite is true.

PV: The larger cultural frame imprints these kinds of assessments.

EW: Right. The French are very skeptical of feminism and gay liberation—leftist critical thinking is considered slightly ridiculous. They've had these periods of being very involved with leftist politics; with Mitterrand, in a way, leftist politics triumphed and sank. I think people are extremely disillusioned with it all. And in America, where it never had a chance, never was really a factor, academic intellectuals go on believing in it because it was never put to the test. And now, because of the collapse of Communism in general, in America all that

energy has shifted into lifestyle questions. The thing that really struck me in going back to Brown is the kind of insane length the “politically correct” have gone to. In France, intellectuals are tremendously admired; in America they don’t have any power at all except on the campus, where they have an absolute power, so they tend to torture each other for not being politically correct enough. That’s a perspective I would not have had had I not lived here.

PV: The feminist movement in America even fueled itself on French theory, but the French think, for example, that the idea of Women’s Lib is silly and just a bit weird.

EW: I think what’s interesting in France and in England is that people have been so disabused after having gone through all these political changes over the last forty years that now people do actually say what they think. When the gay anthology came out in England, nobody said, “Why aren’t there women in this thing?” or “Why aren’t there blacks?” Some people wondered why gays need their own anthology, but only one or two. One woman reviewing it for the *Independent* said she read with a voyeur-like curiosity because she wanted to know what gay life was like. In America, you’d never get that. People would be terrified to say they had been voyeuristic about gay life. So when you say, “What have you gotten from French culture?” it’s not as if I go and look at Seurat’s paintings and say, “Oh, now I want to write just like that.” It affects me in a more intimate way. I think if you live cross-culturally, it makes you more independent-minded. You can see that one country is madly chasing after one idea, and another is chasing after another—and where are you in all that.

PV: Has writing the Genet biography influenced your work?

EW: Maybe not in a direct way, but in terms of what to do with one’s life. Recently I’ve had the feeling that I want to write one more big novel and then finish a book of short stories and then never write another word of fiction again. I just want to write plays, which is exactly what Genet did. As Aaron Copland once said, as you get older it’s important not to compete with your younger self, but to do something entirely new—otherwise you just watch your powers diminish.

PV: How has your writing changed over the years in terms of how you approach your work and what you do?

EW: I’m more confident. I tended to be filled with self-doubt before, and never felt that anything was any good, so I scrapped a lot of pages that were perfectly all right. Sometimes I would rack myself between choosing between two possibilities, both of which were equally good. After all, a work of fiction is a fairly long one which begins to establish its own tone and rules, and all you need to do is stick to it and just do it—you shift your concern away from your own self-definition to the work itself.

PV: What about gay fiction and gay writing in general. Is there a gay writer? Is a gay writer really different from a straight writer? And if so, how?

EW: It’s a good question. In terms of a librarian’s phenomenon—in terms of classifying books—yes, gay fiction exists. Things that have changed enormously—there are gay bookshops, self-identified gay writers, readers, mailing lists—a whole system. There’s another phenomenon, which is gay life, which was very marginal and has, with obvious exceptions, really only come into existence since 1969. Nowadays, for example, gays are very well integrated into French

life. The French don't like to be hived off into little small minority groups. People want to stay in the mainstream, and they don't want to find themselves isolated because of race, sexuality, or religion. In France, you don't have a gay novel or a black novel or a Jewish novel—what you have is the novel. But you have famous gay writers, like Barthes, who have won big prizes, who exert some power and who are well known. France, in some ways, has had such a tradition of being open about gay life—it's kind of a nonissue.

PV: Is it solely the subject matter that sets gay fiction apart?

EW: Well, there used to be a lot of debates about the gay sensibility, whereas I would say that there have been successive gay sensibilities which vary according to the era, so that, for instance, there was the camp sensibility in the forties and fifties, then gay liberation, and now there's a kind of profound sadness. So it all depends on a particular moment. And there are some people who have the gay sensibility who are straight and some gay writers, I would say a little like David Leavitt, who strikes me as having a kind of straight sensibility. Then there are some books, like Allan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library*, which could only have been written by a gay person—for instance, the way of mixing sort of sexy backroom culture with high culture seems to me something you don't see that often in straight literature. You get something like Henry Miller, who doesn't seem to me very intellectual, who's a kind of sex beast, who brings in very little of high culture.

PV: You've said you selected things for the anthology on the basis of personal taste. What draws you in fiction?

EW: Well, I like writing about sex. I don't like pornography, and I don't like romantic fiction, which is a kind of hazy veil thrown over the realities of sexuality. Pornography has to follow the actual rhythms of a sex act—it is a sex act itself. The kind of writing that I like describes the humorous and tragic thoughts that go on in your mind when you're actually having sex—which almost nobody has ever written about before, which seems to be brand new, and which is a very interesting subject matter. I like writing about sex; I like writing about morals and manners. I like psychological density. Social comedy. And I'm a very slow reader—I'm almost a lip reader, so I like things to be very carefully and beautifully written. There are great writers like Dostoevsky who are sloppy. I like writers who write very carefully because I like to savor everything.

PV: Certainly your own writing is very tight, not one extraneous word. How does the actual writing process work for you?

EW: I think when you write fiction, there's always a contrast between your obligations to truth and your obligations to beauty, which aren't always the same. You say to yourself, "If I write it this way, it will be more honest, but if I write it that way, it will be more beautiful." It's a real choice, presented in exactly those terms, and depends on what kind of person you are. I'm the one who goes for beauty. The politically correct complain that somebody like Genet is only interested in sadomasochism, so they don't like his view of sexuality, but to me his view of sexuality is so much less important than the quality of the prose, which is so ravishing. The immense contribution far outweighs his personal peccadilloes. When political judgments are passed on writers who should be judged primarily in artistic terms, it makes your blood boil.

PV: Maybe it's a problem between the two poles you cited—truth and beauty.

EW: Well, I want a beauty that comes up from the dirt. Baudelaire is very important in this respect. Beauty that ignores truth is shallow. I want a difficult beauty.

From the Stonewall to *The Burning Library*: Interview with Edmund White

Ryan Prout / 1994

From the [Harvard] *Gay & Lesbian Review* 1.4 (Fall 1994): 5–8. Reprinted by permission.

Cambridge University scholar Ryan Prout interviewed the renowned author while Edmund White was in England last May. White's *The Burning Library*, a collection of his major essays over a twenty-five-year period, has just been published by Knopf. This event offered an occasion for Mr. White, who lives in Paris, to reflect on his work to date as well as his life as a gay writer and expatriate.

Ryan Prout: The most recent Cambridge University *LesBiGay Newsletter* describes you as a “queer hero” and suggests that you might be “A much better model for Cambridge grads than anything the present Cabinet has to offer.” How do you feel about being read as a hero and about being a gay role model?

Edmund White: I'm fifty-four years old now, and the rate at which time flies can seem quite amazing, particularly if you don't have children and so you don't have this reminder that you're aging. Although it's now twenty-five years ago, it seems like only yesterday that the Stonewall uprising took place in 1969. Just by accident I was in that uprising and almost immediately after it took place I wrote a letter to Anne and Alfred Corn who were friends of mine living in Paris at the time. In this letter, which is reproduced in *The Violet Quill Reader* [St. Martin's Press, 1994; and which also appears in the Summer 1994 issue of this *Review*], I described the whole event as I saw it then in a kind of semi-comical way. I certainly had no idea that Stonewall was going to be a great turning point in gay history or history at all, or in my own life. But it *did* have consequences.

I moved to Rome right away, and when I came back a year later I joined a gay consciousness-raising group. I started off both as a writer and as a person thinking that my experience was so peculiar that it wouldn't mean anything to anybody, and now I've ended up seeing myself being almost banally representative of my generation of gay men. It seems to me as if almost everything I do reflects what everybody in my generation is doing, including being HIV positive.

I've avoided that question about being a hero because I don't have any sense of that at all. I think this is because, firstly, I live in France where there's no such thing as a really vital gay movement, and secondly, since I'm not very well known there anyway, I've been protected from the consequences of being a hero, if that's what I am.

RP: I just watched again your interview with Jeremy Isaacs and from that I had the impression that you'd returned to America.

EW: I did go back in 1991 to teach at Brown University. Then, when he became ill and we had no health care for my lover, Hubert Sorin, who just died about

six weeks ago of AIDS, we had to move back to France, which was no hardship anyway. We wanted to be back. So I only stayed a year-and-a-half in America.

RP: As *The Burning Library* shows, you're someone who's deeply immersed in French culture and you've said that from an early age you had always dreamt of going to France. Why is that?

EW: It not only seemed like a great intellectual center, but I think, for me, it seemed like a place where bohemianism and intellectuality and a certain kind of glossy "high society" came together, and indeed they do. In other words, I think in America you find rather dowdy professors who can only talk about their own field and who have no general conversation and no notion at all that what they're doing might be of interest to non-specialists, and then you have rich people who are very dull and never read a book, and then you have bohemians who are usually not very sure of themselves anymore because they've been so overshadowed, if they're painters, for instance, by the marketplace. It's as if whatever bohemian values there were in America, let's say from the beginning of the century to about 1955 or 1960, got wiped out by the values of the marketplace. But in France, it seems to me that the strange confluence of these various elements still exists, a kind of worldly sophistication that joins with a real dedication to the arts and to reading and to making art, and especially to consuming art. I like that about France.

RP: You've also given the impression in previous interviews that it's much easier to be gay in France because you don't have to be gay, that is, a gay life as such doesn't exist there. When I mentioned to a gay acquaintance that you had said this, he suggested that though that may be the case for a well-known writer from abroad, it certainly isn't the case for French people themselves, especially those living in provincial France.

EW: I don't think you need to be famous or a writer to have very nice gay life in France—that is, a gay life of the kind that I like, which is one in which you're oftentimes integrated into the straight world. Now, when I go back to America and I attend an all-male dinner party, it always strikes me as weird. In France, what seems to be more usual, to give you an example, is the kind of dinner party I gave last night where I think all but one of the men was gay and all the women were straight. That seems to be what usually happens.

RP: In your essay "The Joys of Gay Life" you say that one of the advantages to being gay is that we're introspective. Comparing your approach to dealing with the AIDS crisis to say, someone like Derek Jarman's, I wanted to ask you if an introspective attitude to HIV can enhance gay culture without reducing it to a single issue, which is what you say we must be careful to avoid.

EW: I was one of the five founding members of the Gay Men's Health Crisis in America as well as its first president. What I realized very quickly was that if I remained an AIDS activist, I would never write another word. When I look at Larry Kramer I realize that he is a hero. He really has dedicated himself to AIDS activism, a choice which I think is a noble one and one which meant that there are quite a few books which he might have written which he hasn't. I made the other choice. I think what I've been trying to do with the Genet biography, for instance, is precisely to remind people that gay culture can be about things other than AIDS. I remember reading Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* at a fairly early point in the AIDS crisis. It came to me as a wonderful breath of fresh air because I thought, "It's great to be reminded of this important cultural hero

who lived long before the AIDS era.” Genet, though he died in 1986 and made one or two remarks about AIDS, basically never thought about it and it didn’t touch his life.

RP: When I heard you talking about the biography when it was published in this country, it struck me that the fact that you’d dedicated so much time to producing a work on the life of someone else was in its own way just as heroic a gesture as that of someone like Larry Kramer.

EW: Thank you. Larry Kramer was somewhat vexed with me at the time although now I think he’s forgiven me. He thought that if you were gay and were a writer or in any way a spokesperson you should feel obliged to talk about AIDS and nothing but AIDS 100 percent of the time. But I had more the take that I think you’re suggesting, which is that it was important that gay culture not be reduced to a single issue. Now I’m writing a novel in which I deal with both the seventies and the eighties, that’s to say with the periods both before and after the outbreak of AIDS. So, I suppose there’s a kind of natural trajectory to the book. But I’m not really writing it chronologically. I write about the earlier period and then I skip forward to the present. It’s a kind of mélange of “before” and “after” because I feel that either period is unendurable alone. If you just wrote about everybody having lots of sex in the seventies and ended a book there, which is what I originally intended to do, I think it would be intolerable. And if you wrote a book only about everyone dying, I think that would also be pretty grim. Something that I do constantly in my own thoughts is to mix the two periods, and the book’s form reproduces my own mental experience to produce what I hope will be an interesting approach.

RP: When I first learned the title of the new anthology of your essays and critical work, I was reminded of something that Bulgakov said, which was that the one thing that doesn’t burn is a document. Would you say something about your views on writing and testimony?

EW: I’ve heard various sources for the expression on which the title is based. An old French woman who’s about eighty now told me that her mother used to tell her when she was a girl, “You must pay attention to what I’m saying because when I’m dead it’s as though a library will have burned.” And some French people say “*Quand une vieille personne meurt, c’est comme une bibliothèque qui brûle.*” Other people have told me that the expression comes from Africa and yet other people ascribe it to a particular African writer but they can’t remember which one. Marina Warner sent me a citation from a Caribbean woman poet whose use of the phrase suggested it was a local saying. But in any event, wherever it comes from, it seems to be quite a common expression. It suggests that the writer’s job is to try to take down some of the experiences of other people before they all go up in flames. And I think, having lived through the AIDS era and having witnessed many of my friends leaving no testimonials behind, I have felt very strongly the oblivion of mortality and that the writer, maybe, can push that back a little bit, at least for a short time.

RP: You once characterized the life cycle of gay liberation as being like a May fly’s: “Oppressed in the fifties, liberated in the sixties, exalted in the seventies, and wiped out in the eighties.”

EW: I think that was hasty. It hasn’t really been wiped out at all. When I said that in 1988 or thereabouts, it was before I went back to America, and so I wasn’t aware of the tremendously vital upsurge of gay culture there that had

been stimulated precisely by AIDS activism. In France, gay liberation has pretty well died out. Like feminism and other liberation movements, it is subject to a rapid cycle of being “à la mode” and then “démodé.” Now you find that in France if you say you’re a gay liberationist people will sneer and ask, “How can you possibly do something so démodé?” Identification with the feminist movement provokes the same response. There is no feminism in France. Since they’re completely forgotten there, French people can’t believe that writers like Luce Irigaray or Hélène Cixous are famous in America. Even Julia Kristeva is seen differently depending on which country you’re in. So, living in France I just wasn’t aware that gay culture was alive and thriving in America. Now I am aware of it, but I’m not entirely happy with it, as the last essay in the book, “The Personal Is Political,” suggests.

RP: Obviously, chronology is important in the way the anthology is organized. One of the essays is about Goytisolo and, to ask a Goytisolian question, should we read the collection backwards or forwards? Which way are we going?

EW: I suppose it depends on how much you’ve thought about these things. To some readers, the beginning could seem terribly basic and they’d want to skip ahead. It’s interesting to me that young people, your age, who I thought knew all about the history of gay liberation and would take it for granted, were surprised that as early on as the beginning of the seventies we were already thinking about all these same issues that are still being debated today. I think that when people see the early dates for some of those essays—“The Gay Philosopher,” for example—they’re amused to notice that we were already debating gay identity in 1970.

RP: What struck me in reading the early essays was just how late it was in terms of general modern history that things began to change so that twenty-five years later it would be acceptable for someone like me to say to the powers that be at Cambridge, for example, I want to study questions of homosexuality. I was surprised to realize in reading your essays that it’s only such a short time ago that this would have been completely out of the question.

EW: Yes, it’s amazing how quickly things have evolved. But there are still many contradictions. My boyfriend Hubert was astonished that I was hired by Brown University because I was homosexual, and that in the same town where the university is located, Providence, Rhode Island, you could be beaten up for being homosexual. He said, “In France we would have neither one nor the other, there’s no fag bashing but neither would you ever be allowed to talk about your personal life in the classroom.” I think most French people still see homosexuality as being something strictly personal which you shouldn’t mention one way or the other, just as you shouldn’t mention how many mistresses you have if you’re heterosexual.

RP: You talk about writers like Marguerite Yourcenar and Nietzsche, who don’t so much evolve as endlessly tease out themes set very early on in their lives. Do you see your own writing as evolutionary? What have been the most significant changes in the twenty-four years of writing covered by the anthology?

EW: I think the evolving consciousness is reflected more in my fiction than in my nonfiction. My first two novels, *Forgetting Elena* and *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, were, broadly speaking, avant-garde or nonrealistic novels. *Forgetting Elena* wasn’t even openly homosexual, only covertly homosexual, and *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* was similarly very exalted and poetic in its tone. I think

it's only really with *A Boy's Own Story* that I began to write simply and autobiographically about my own experience and about homosexuality. I like to think that I kept in a lot of the complexities found in the earlier novels in treating that theme. A young writer today would probably start off with *A Boy's Own Story*; and a lot of people assume it was my first novel, when in fact it was the fourth or fifth.

I think it took me quite a while to reach homosexuality as the primary subject matter of a novel. It was partly a question of my own need to undo a strictly personal reticence in talking about that material. I was able to do this in my writing. In *Nocturnes*, for instance, I dealt with the problems I had with my father on a fantasy level and translated them into extremely different terms that would have been unrecognizable to him. Then, in *A Boy's Own Story*, which I wrote after his death, I was able to tackle him as a subject much more directly, simply, and factually. In the same way, I think *Caracole* was an attempt to look at the interrelationship between sex and power, but again on a fantasy level in a so-called heterosexual world. It's not a gay book. After *Caracole*, in *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, I was able to approach the same subject matter, sex and politics, sex and power, but homosexually and autobiographically.

In other words, I would say that oftentimes I seem to need to go through a stage of trying out new material on a fantasy level before I can deal with it autobiographically. But I like both kinds of writing. When I started off as a writer I was very impressed by a remark of Valéry's (Gide said the same thing in his *Journals*). He said that if you were a good writer you should lose with each new book the admirers you had gained with the preceding one; in other words, you should be radically changing each time you write. I felt that people would be dazzled by how virtuoso I was and how I never was repeating myself. But, in fact, everybody now discusses my oeuvre, tiny as it is, as though it's totally coherent, which surprises me because I don't see the coherence myself. But I'm happy that people discuss it at all.

RP: From your later essays I have the impression that you think the essentialist-constructionist debate is fairly boring and stagnant. At the same time, though, there seems to be a conflict between positions within that debate in your own writing, a conflict which appears to be quite fruitful for you. Bergman writes that for you "The body is the only way we can have sense of our being in the world," yet you yourself, when you're talking about the ad hoc-ness of gay living arrangements, for example, say that because these arrangements have no name they're almost invisible. The contest between an ontology of language and an ontology of the body seems to be an important one in your work.

EW: It's funny because I was just talking to some French people about a similar contradiction that I think you can find in the work of Barthes. It seems to me that he's always holding out for the body as though it's something that you can oppose to the *doxa* and that doesn't seem to me to be rational. But now you're saying to me that I do the same and I think you're perfectly right. I suppose we all have some Edenic notion of something that's going to be unmodified by culture, of something that remains primal and instinctual. Although we've all been trained not to think that way, what often happens is that the target is shifted in order to posit some new thing as the element which precedes culture, as that which is nature. David Bergman may find that process inflecting my writing, but I myself don't see it. What I find is more of an irrational attraction to beauty, to physical beauty. I think that I find beauty to be a self-evident value.

Last night I had a young German woman staying with me at my apartment in Paris. She's a Genet scholar, very Protestant and very German. When I said something about it being obvious that people would fall in love with somebody as beautiful as X, she said, "How can you say that!" She was quite outraged and she seemed to find that perspective almost immoral. I said, "But you're an artist, aren't you, and don't you respond to beauty?" "Yes," she said, "But intellectual beauty or artistic beauty." My response to that was to say, "But physical beauty is the *same kind* of beauty." I'm a Platonist in that sense, I guess. I do see a coherence between all forms of beauty. And I find it strange that American politically correct people should accuse me of being a "looksist"—that's their word—as though that were some terrible folly that needed to be eradicated. I have fallen in love with ugly people and I can probably find beauty in most people. I can even be sexually indifferent to physical beauty but I will always respect it.

RP: In *The Burning Library* you talk about how those gay people are still imprisoned in so many ways. I wondered if you would expand on that idea and perhaps talk a bit about the differences between America and Britain where gay oppression is concerned.

EW: What happens, I think, is that there's a small group composed of people who are self-identified as gay, who are usually from a middle-class background, who have independent means and who step up the rhetoric. They will say, "We must all be gay and in very evolved ways with a very high consciousness" and so on. The trouble with that elevated level of rhetoric is that it leaves behind in the dust the millions of people who are still coming out. I'm actually going out now with a twenty-year-old Englishman who's from a working-class background and he's completely tormented by the question of coming out. He flies into a terrible fit of anxiety if anybody suspects him of being gay. Of course, he chose the wrong person to go out with! Again and again I see this same battle being fought because a young gay man coming out today isn't being brought up by gay people. He's being brought up by working-class parents in, say, Hackney, so he's got to deal with their values and he's got to work through gay history all over again for himself.

I think we forget that the conservative values of society have to be faced again and again by each generation. It can be dangerous when gay leaders have evolved so far that they've lost touch with this very primary coming-out experience. Some evolved and self-identified gay people are very bored with the whole idea of coming out because we've heard too much about it, but it will always be there as a theme.

RP: You say quite defiantly at one point that nobody has the right to deny anybody else's feelings or his or her own account of them. Do you think the way that mainstream society reacts to gay people's experience of grief is another demonstration of how some people's feelings continue to be less respectable than others?

EW: I started seeing a psychotherapist about four weeks before my lover died. He died six weeks ago and I'm still seeing the therapist. One of the things he keeps saying to me is that all the friends around me, most of whom are heterosexual, aren't letting me grieve in the way I want to grieve. He says they either think it's sacrilegious that I'm already going out with somebody else or they think that I'm not being sufficiently courageous if I break down and start crying. In other words, you have to follow the rhythm that the dominant

environment dictates. My therapist said, "To hell with them, you really have to grieve in the way that you want to and in the way that feels natural to you." I only cite my personal experience there because it's the one I know best, but maybe everyone who grieves finds that there's a program to it. Interestingly, I thought, the therapist told me, "Well, writing is a defense." I dwelt on that idea for a week and it occurred to me that perhaps it's true that writers are somehow able to distance their feelings through writing about them. But, on the other hand, if you are a writer you are obliged to be honest. You can't repeat the standard myths, like the one of the dead beloved that most people resort to. You have to keep even your resentments alive and you probably have to entertain the negative thoughts longer than most people would feel comfortable doing. In other words, if you're a writer I think you take into account and entertain for longer than anybody else would the feelings of abandonment and of anger that you have towards the person who's left you, by dying.

RP: Do you think you will write about your partner?

EW: I'm very eager to, actually, and I'm already taking lots of notes. Joe Brainard is a wonderful American writer who's about to die. He wrote something called *I Remember* which inspired Georges Perec to write a book called *Je me souviens*. Now I'm doing something I think of as "Je me souviens Hubert." This is simply a notebook for myself in which I put down all the things I remember about him. Just the little things, like the stories he would tell me about his aunt. But again, it's an example of the burning library: it's the details which count, which keep someone alive.

RP: If you had to write a PhD thesis on the works of Edmund White, what would it be about?

EW: About somebody who was subjected to a tension arising from two very different sets of expectations: one set came from a literary community that wasn't particularly gay-identified and the other came from a gay community that wasn't particularly literary. I think the tension has been a fruitful one and an unusual one for a writer. It wasn't until Nabokov praised my first book that a lot of literary people who had previously shown no interest in my work and who certainly weren't interested in homosexuality began to think that I might be a writer worth watching. I was very aware of that. It took me years to get anything published at all, so I was enormously grateful to Nabokov for the interest that he had shown in my work because it got me started as a writer and I was already well into my thirties when that happened. The difficulties I'd had in getting started and Nabokov's interest were very real influences on the way I thought about the work that I was then in the process of doing.

On the other hand, after *Nocturnes*, I was already very much writing for a gay audience that had almost no books at that point. This was an audience eager for me to write in a kind of programmatic way, presenting positive gay heroes, something I always resisted. But I was aware of it. To me that is what would make an interesting thesis, to show somebody at the crux between a set of aesthetic expectations and a set of political expectations from two entirely different groups.

The Day That Edmund White Kissed Me

Greg Johnston / 1995

From *Island* 62 (Fall 1995): 16–23. Reprinted by permission.

Greg Johnston: Firstly, I want to ask you what inspired you to write? Was there a specific incident that created a need in you to respond through writing?

Edmund White: I started writing when I was very young. I always wanted to do something in the arts, and I would sort of feverishly go back and forth from one to another, and I'd play the piano, or I played the harp. I played lots of musical instruments. I wrote an opera, I painted, I danced, I sang, I acted, I did everything, but I didn't have any talent. I was slightly lazy too, I think. Too lazy to really master music, for instance. I had an eighth grade teacher, that would be about fourteen years old, who thought I had some talent and that it could possibly develop into something. She wasn't overly encouraging, but she was slightly encouraging, and that seemed to me to be honest, and it also was the first praise that I'd really gotten for anything. So I think I responded in that way. Maybe it was almost fatal, my desire for approval.

GJ: After the initial stages of writing, was it a hard or easy transition to then shift your gaze, as a writer, to gay concerns?

EW: Oddly enough, almost from the beginning, it was almost always about gay stuff. When I was sent off to boarding school, when I was sixteen, I wrote a gay novel called *The Tower Window*, or I had another title for it, *Dark Currents*. I think my idea was that I would write that and then sell it and I'd become a millionaire and I'd be independent of my parents. But oddly enough I never sent it off to a publisher. I think I didn't know how to do that exactly. But I wrote it in a fever of excitement. In my school we had two hours of obligatory study hall every night in our rooms, so I would do all my homework in the afternoon so that in the evening I could just write. It was really like going on stage every night.

GJ: In the initial stages of the writing process, do you write purely for your own entertainment or are you considering the reader at the same time, or does this consideration come in later drafts?

EW: I definitely think of the reader from the very beginning. I like to give readings to see how things go down and if they work or not. I can't understand when people say that they don't write for the reader because it seems to me that the whole art is, in fact, manipulating the feelings of another person. It's like a conversation in which one person is doing all the talking. I used to be interested in the reader response theory of art. I think intuitively it interested me more than from a formal point of view. What's important to me are things like—how many colors can a person absorb per page? Sometimes I'll read student writing where they've used nineteen color words on one paragraph, and I'll think "Well, that's insane." My approach is really based on laws of human perception and how much you can take in, at what rate? How often does a character have to be re-mentioned before you remember him? What's more memorable, an image that's static or one that's kinetic—that's moving—and I would say kinetic. In

other words, almost every part of my craft, such that it is, has been based on reader response.

GJ: I want to consider *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*. They involve the reworking of the genre of growing-up stories to include gay issues. Essentially they are the age-old story of an adolescent's attempt to understand the self and the world. This private conflict is set against the public conflict of emerging gay politics and existing and emerging images of homosexuality. During the books there is a feeling that self-liberation and collective liberation both slouch towards Stonewall to be born. Is this rewriting and expansion of an existing literary genre to include gay issues an important process?

EW: I think it was for gays. I think it is no longer important. I just read a wonderful short story by Peter Wells, a New Zealand writer. It was about a boy coming out and having his first sexual experience with an antique dealer. It's so exquisitely written. Once you read something that's beautiful in a particular genre, the whole genre works again. The beauty lies in finding these particularly sharp, aching, details and psychological insights that are fresh. In a way, you could say that the coming-out story is an age-old part of gay folk law, because it's pillow talk really. At least in my day when you would meet somebody, pretty soon you'd say, "when did you come out." It was sort of a sign of intimacy that it wasn't just a trip and that you were actually curious of the other person. You'd ask them for their coming-out story and you'd exchange coming-out stories. Everyone always had theirs down pat.

I think that when I wrote *A Boy's Own Story* I almost felt a sense of weariness before beginning to write it because it was like what the French call the *scène à faire*, the obligatory scene, the one you have to write, the thing you have to do. In all well-made plays, there was always that scene that you have to write. I felt like it was an empty ecological niche that nobody had written yet. It was aching to be written. But it seems to me what is strange is that *A Boy's Own Story*, especially, seems to be rather an odd book. People remember it as being much more conventional than it is. If you read it, it is a very weird book. It curls around itself in terms of chronology, the boy himself is quite flaky and strange. He betrays his teacher in the last chapter. I think it shows how there was such a need for that book that people were willing even to take a book which wasn't really very suitable for the genre.

GJ: Gay liberation has placed severe new stresses on language. Language did not have the words to describe modes of behavior, for example, homophobia. It also did not contain the processes and models with which same-sex couples could act out their lives, for example, to effectively court without the scene becoming humorous or violent. Language did not contain models with which the male gaze could be turned onto another male without simply reapplying the traditional models used to describe women. What role has gay literature had in this process of the expansion of language?

EW: I think that it's not exclusively a literary problem, but it's primarily a social and psychological problem. I still think that two men who meet today and fall in love don't know who they are and that it's always shifting. Maybe that is true even with straight couples, I don't know, probably it is if there is something alive going on. But certainly I feel that in my case, I keep thinking, "am I being this boy's mother, am I being his father? What do I mean when I call him a boy, even though he's forty?" If I say, "he's beautiful," what kind of appropriation is that? Is that a kind of Edwardian word or is that a word that one uses for a

woman? It's a good case of where literature and life almost coincide. I feel that the duty of literature is not to be trail blazing, but to simply record what people do actually think. And maybe in that way it is trail blazing, but only in the sense that it brings to consciousness a lot of the shadowy effort to find a good fit. And I would say that I've never in any relationship that I've had, ever felt that I've had a good fit, either for myself or the other person.

GJ: Is that lack of fit manifested through lack of language to describe experience, or through other factors?

EW: I suppose it's what approach you have to language theory and philosophically. I guess I'm old enough, and old fashioned enough, to still believe that there is a psychological reality that words reflect rather than that words determine. Maybe it's the curse of being in my generation, or maybe it is still true, that nobody knows who they are in gay life. That it is all yet to be invented.

GJ: I just remember the first time I used the word *boyfriend* to describe someone, it stuck, it took a while before it could be used with a fluid or determined meaning. I had to attach new significance to the word no matter how wholeheartedly I wanted to use it. I needed examples of its usage in this manner.

EW: I think that it is jarring, all words are. *Lover* sounds so lurid. *My partner* sounds clinical, a lot of people say that. And now there is a new phenomenon of straight people saying it, and suspending the use of the pronoun for hours, so that you can't tell if it's a boy or a girl. And if you ask it's vulgar on your part.

GJ: Adolescence involves the process of recognizing the discrepancy between the myths of experience and the newly perceived realities. In the homosexual subject this is amplified and attenuated because there is a major rift and discrepancy in a basic, primary myth. Does this potentially force the homosexual into a process of self-analysis that the heterosexual can avoid or miss—particularly the young and good looking?

EW: Yes, I think so. I wrote an essay that was in my book of essays called "The Gay Philosopher." I think I wrote it in 1969 and it was in the book *The Burning Library*. The whole idea in that was that no matter how thick skulled one might be, one still is obliged to enter into a long kind of introspection about the most basic thing imaginable. But that could happen whether you come out at sixteen or sixty. I don't think that it's necessarily tied down to lessons. I think it has to do with the processes of coming out. I think that if you come out in adolescence, as most people do, that only adds to the acuteness of the problem.

GJ: Continuing with myths, could we discuss the marionette show in *A Boy's Own Story*? This scene provides a recognizable scenario for all adolescents. The marionette show offers a simply read and consistent semiotic system. The child viewer assumes that this is how the world works—both dangers and pleasures are signposted in a clear and consistent manner. Snow White is presented as consistent in name, dress, and manner. The homosexual goes on to find that not only does this system break down in a universal sense, but that it must be inverted. One must venture into danger in order to gain pleasure. The homosexual subject must continually subvert the normal myths in order to gain a sense of self. Public toilets now become the rose garden where there is the potential for both good and bad; indeed, the notions of good and bad collapse.

EW: I guess I would resist a too exclusively homosexual reading of that particular passage, as it seems to me that one of the themes in the book is also the development of an artist, not just the development of a homosexual. I guess that becomes more clear in *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*. I think one of the ideas that I have is that there is this disparity between the life of the imagination and reality, and that there is something inefficacious about the life of the imagination. That people praise it too much. And that there is something insipid about life. Neither really works out. There's a point in one of those two books where the narrator complains about how insipid life is and that he thinks of the devil not as being absolutely evil but as being this kind of listlessness. He has an image of a man in a T-shirt who watches TV by day and who doesn't shave and who can't get out of his chair; the terrible boredom and inertia of life on one hand and then the so-called conciliations of the imagination really don't work. They are more convincing perhaps to the audience than they are to the perpetrator. The artist benefits less from the creative life than the audience does.

GJ: In your writing, and also in Genet, there is an emergence of seeing the opposite to the traditional negative images associated with homosexuality. Through this behavior, anonymous sex in toilets, etc., homosexuals are able to outwardly signify and establish the "otherness" of their lives. Instead of trying to find the similarities between heterosexuals and homosexuals, this writing attempts to celebrate the diversity.

EW: That's certainly true. I would say that I am the opposite to a writer like David Leavitt, who I think, because of his own particular trajectory in life, is very keenly aware of the resemblances of a character like him and his parents, straight or gay. Even the title of one of his books, *Equal Affections*, that says it all. If he represents the assimilationist wing of gay experience, I was always more the separatist. That's not the word I mean, as I certainly believe in interacting with the straight world, but I also feel that gays have a separate destiny.

GJ: That seems the very thing that should be celebrated—the diverse point of view. In the same way that someone with black skin has a diverse point of view. Instead of trying to scratch around for similarities, it seems more appropriate to celebrate the diversity.

EW: Exactly. You just need to look at this book *Gay New York*, which I have just been reading and which is a marvelous book. In talking about Harlem in the twenties and thirties, the author makes a distinction between working-class black gays, who really were, I would say, celebrating what was unique about their experience. They were having enormous drag shows that were well attended, and costume balls that rivaled the one we saw the other night in numbers, expense, and ingenuity. Whereas the Harlem Renaissance writers, almost all of whom were homosexual, were very, very closeted because they didn't want to let down the race. So they were the Bruce Bawers of their day, whereas the working class and more recent immigrants to Harlem seemed to have a much freer attitude towards expressing their homosexuality including the drift towards drag [Bruce Bawer's *A Place at the Table* calls for the assimilation of gays into mainstream American society—GJ].

GJ: There are many anthologies of gay short stories. In Australia in the last few months three major anthologies have been published of Australian gay writing,

and your new book *Skinned Alive* is a collection of short stories. Gay writing has embraced the short story, allowing somewhat of a renaissance of the genre. This is partially due to every gay person having a coming-out short story. These often exist in an oral tradition and are often repeated as a part of developing courting and meeting rituals. Most gay men can relate to this genre. Has this helped the genre to develop?

EW: I think there are various factors. I think that one thing is that an anthology of short stories by many different people can sometime reflect multiculturalism, so that I think there is an effort to get a kind of balance. But whether the book is a collection of short stories by one person or a genuine anthology by many people, I think that the short story also reflects another aspect of gay writing which is as old as gay writing. This is the documentation of the exotic. There's always been this kind of casebook aspect to gay writing. So, if there's the confessional part that we've been talking about, there's also the casebook part. These often times come together, so that a story will be both a coming out and the documentation of a very weird gay scene that one may not have known about. For instance, there was a book called *Crystal Boys* that came out a couple of years ago in English that was the story of rent boys in Taiwan. I just read a book called *The Mad Man in America*, which was about a black middle-class man who picks up homeless men who are white, and uses them sexually. Quite shocking and brilliantly written. But in other words it is that kind of Havelock Ellis urge to document some strange corner of experience that hasn't been written about yet.

Then I think there is yet another aspect to the short story renaissance, which is that AIDS, as a theme, is something that I think is very suited to the short story. If you commit yourself to writing a novel about AIDS, there's the kind of almost inevitable dreary trajectory of beginning with illness and ending with death and I think the inevitability of that decline is so depressing that it's very hard especially for people with HIV/AIDS to read it. Whereas a short story can get into and out of the subject quickly at an odd angle. So someone like Adam Mars-Jones can write a short story about the problem of getting rid of the sex toys and leather bits that belong to a dead friend before his parents discover it. And that can be very amusing.

GJ: Does the use of the short story represent the first step by gay men in writing a gay canon?

EW: I feel that we are on a collision course in trying to establish a gay canon because it seems to me that the kind of multiculturalism and democratization that is inherent in the whole literary gay movement, will never be squeezed into the foundation garment of a canon. The last essay I wrote in the book *The Burning Library* is a sort of attack on the idea of the canon from several different points of view. One is that it's an essentially conservative and elitist notion, and what gays, and other minority groups, want to do is tack a few of their works onto a long list that begins with Aristotle. This seems to me pointless, that the whole idea of a canon should be exploded, and that one should just deliver oneself to the promiscuity of lots of works that coexist and one doesn't try to rate.

GJ: I think the idea of "canon" I have is of it being more of a market place through which ideas can be traded by different ideologies, rather than a fixed list.

EW: Well, maybe. I wouldn't call that a canon. A canon, I feel, is something for

people who don't like to read very much. That they are always trying to have the shortest list possible. Whereas people who like to read are always asking their friends for the newest titles so they can read more rather than less.

GJ: Has the initial role of gay writing been to explain homosexuality and notate the injustices that have been perpetrated against homosexuals through history?

EW: Actually, remarkably little, if you think about it. Again this book *Gay New York*, since it's about a very early period of the twentieth century, it mentions all the punishments for people who were involved in bath raids, and there's seven years imprisoned, five years in the workhouse for touching a butcher boy. It's unbelievable the severity of the punishments in America at that time. We know from the Oscar Wilde trials how severe those times were. And yet, I would say, that very little early twentieth-century gay literature has been about that, and even in my period there was a lot more about psychological suffering than there was the actual criminal process. I think it would have been healthier if we had put in more of the criminal stuff, because even to this day very few young people are aware of the actual severity of the punishments that pursued people and still do in certain parts of America. There were just eight murders of gay men in Texas by teenage boys and it's something that isn't very well known.

I gave a speech at the Museum of Contemporary Art about Mapplethorpe and I was trying to get people to think how daring those photos were even in the seventies. I tried to just mention some of the political battles that were going on at the time. The fact that there was active Christian campaigns going on against homosexuals, that black and white men together, which was a subgroup within the gay world, was one of the few places where there was any notion of the reconciliation of the races at that point. I was trying to recreate the historical moment so that people would see the photos as they were intended rather than as they are read now, as sort of an invasion and exploitation of black men by a white man. Now the sexual exploitation, the vitriolization of black men is considered so outré that it clouds people's visions of the other political issues of the time.

GJ: The coming-out short story has at once the potential to excite and explain. This, in itself, tends to limit the writing to be read by and have significance to gay people. Does that mean that gay writing is hermetic to gay society? If homosexuality was taken as a given, homosexual subjects would no longer have to explain, justify, and delineate their existence, but would simply be set free to act out their diverse views of the world. Could this shift, this maturation, create a genre of literature which is universally interesting and potentially richer?

EW: Firstly, I think there's a trap in the word *universal*, because I do think that it's a word that's wielded by white men in power. Why is John Updike universal and Toni Morrison isn't? I would say because one of them is a white man. There's always something considered very special about a black woman writing about her experience. Whereas when a white man writes about his experience, especially if he's a Protestant from an upper-middle-class family, it is considered universal. All you have to do if you're an American is move to Paris and you read John Updike as a sociologist, and rather narrow sociology at that.

But going back to the other question, I think that what is interesting in what you're saying is that heterosexuals that are gay friendly are already writing the kind of fiction that you're imagining. For instance, someone like Iris Murdoch always has two or three gay characters wandering around in her writing, who are sometimes evil, sometimes virtuous, sometimes weak, sometimes strong. But

they're just sort of there. They are part of the landscape and they can play a prominent role in a book like *The Black Prince*, but they can play minor roles in other novels too. I would say that that is almost Utopian. What's interesting is that it is easier probably for a heterosexual writer like her to do than for us, at this moment. Somebody like Harold Pinter in a one-act play that he called *The Collection* is able to balance off a straight couple with a gay couple. What happens is that the younger man in the gay couple falls in love with the woman in the straight couple, so that the two older husbands of the straight and gay couples get together and conspire about how to get their mates back. So it's very amusing and it was written already in the sixties. And yet I would say that it was a vision that was probably more available to a well-meaning gay-friendly straight than it would have been to a gay writer, who is still struggling with the problem of being gay. It's not so easy for him to view it from the outside.

GJ: At the time of the Stonewall Riots, and the subsequent birth of gay liberation, there must have been a sense of openmindedness—a sense of common purpose which overrode borderlines of class, race, and gender in the gay community. This egalitarian purpose seems to have waned with increased liberation, with gay people becoming the bigoted, not only towards heterosexuals, but amongst themselves. Is this sort of reversal a natural progression towards a medium?

EW: It probably has to do more with large social currents. I think that gay liberation at the time of Stonewall owed a tremendous amount to the whole atmosphere of the time. This was the student rebellion, the antiwar protest, the end of the hippy movement, the crescendo of rock and roll, the idea that taking drugs somehow equaled liberation, a kind of last gasp of the bohemian. There was a kind of very general euphoria, and a feeling of optimism.

GJ: The subject of biography, the writer, the artist, must be viewed by the biographer through shifting veils of times, cultural and political practices, and often the unhelpful response of the subjects, who may very well have covered, and continue to cover, their tracks. You have illustrated these possibilities in the short story "His Biographer." How close can this process possibly represent the life and times of a writer, and then accurately connect this knowledge to the work of the writer?

EW: That's interesting because my nephew is actually writing my biography now. At the moment he's doing my childhood and he'll call me up and ask me for hours and hours about things. But of course, all he can really ask, all a biographer can ever really ask, is about facts and chronology, cause and effect, who did you know? Every now and again it will occur to me to say to him, "I forgot to tell you that when I was eight, nine, ten, eleven, I was obsessed with the idea of being a king." I thought I actually was a prince. In my first novel *Forgetting Elena* there is a character who feels he's despised and maybe is a servant. He's an amnesiac who doesn't remember who he is and doesn't recognize anyone. But by the end of the novel he discovers that he is actually the prince of the island. That was a kind of replay of a very old myth of mine. I was always playing games with other children of king and slave. I didn't much care if I was the king or the slave. The important thing was that the ritual should be performed. A little bit like Genet's *The Maids*. That's the sort of thing that I think is very essential to understanding my work and my personality, but it's the sort of thing that a biographer would never think to ask. How could you ask it? How would you know to ask it?

GJ: It seems you're very willing to engage in the biographical process, more so than other writers, for example Genet.

EW: He is my nephew and I raised him and it's his first book and I'm eager to help him. I think often times when you read a biography, it's nothing but the dry facts and there is no animating spirit. That's what is admirable about Sartre's *Saint Genet*. It has none of the dry facts. You could reduce all the biographical facts to about thirty pages. But what it does have is a sense of evolution of the spirit—the movement from being rejected by everyone, to becoming a thief, and going from thief to dandy and then from dandy to artist—in a kind of progression he marks out very clearly and with amazing skill, and it's very true to Genet also.

GJ: Like Genet, as the writer of autofiction, is it infuriating or do you enjoy the process when a biographer starts to unpick your carefully constructed webs of fact and fiction—even if the additions and subtractions to the text were made in an effort to retain style, rather than to cover.

EW: Yes. I tried with Genet to not unmask him. There have been a number of studies done in English and in French about Genet that all suggest a kind of unmasking of the Great Deceiver, because people got on to the fact that autobiographical novels were not accurate. I tried to do the opposite. I tried to show that he had nothing to hide. If anything, in his novels he made himself appear a more evil character than he actually was. He was usually going in the direction of trying to conform to his own legend. He was trying to create a legend. And yes, I think that it is slightly infuriating. Part of the impulse of writing stories like the most recent ones in my book, stories like "Watermark" and "Pyrography," is this rush to write about those things before my biographer does.

GJ: You have said that Genet sought to construct himself as more evil than he really was. Within his work, Genet constructed and connected himself to the traditional myths of the homosexual as sinner and thief. When I first saw the BBC Nigel Williams's interview with Genet, I was struck by how mild mannered and reserved a gentleman he was. Although somewhat irritated by the interviewing process, he still engaged that day in what he termed "the work" at hand. Was this a link that you sought to make in your biography of Genet? Even for yourself, who has admitted to being homosexual, and have written candidly about your various sex exploits, there seems a continual surprise in interviews that—quote—"there is nothing aggressive about White's own candor." "Avuncular, pink-cheeked cherubic, professional." In these interviews there was an element of surprise, that you could lead an overt gay sex life and be a gentleman.

EW: Well ... Genet actually was a criminal and I'm not, and he did work much harder than I ever did to draw a portrait of himself in fire and brimstone. I don't see him as quite as mild mannered as you see him in that BBC piece. After all he did the most stunning thing you could possibly do which was to turn the cameras around. Once one submits to an interview in any kind of traditional way, one becomes a consumer item. In other words you are consumed by the process. The process is more powerful than you are. Anything that you might say is annihilated by the fact of having submitted to the form. Whereas Genet was such a man of the theatre that he knew to turn the form on its head. That's what he did do in that interview. A lot of the English people I've talked to who saw that thing at the time, hated it. They become apoplectic because of his

arrogance in upsetting the form. The point is that the telespectator is the consumer, and the interviewer on the screen helps this unassimilable object to become a tasty bit for consumption. And if the interviewee reverses this process, there's a kind of indigestion that starts to take place and it's very, very disturbing to everyone. It certainly was one of the most memorable interviews and it infuriated so many people at the BBC that I can't get them to rerun it again.

GJ: Do you think the need to write the biographies of gay writers can be seen as a double-edged sword? Not only do these writings attempt to possess and reveal the lift of a writer and its connection to his or her work, in order to potentially achieve a fuller appreciation of the work, but with a gay writer, it serves part of a public "outing" process. There is a need to pin down the traditionally obscured sex lives of these writers/artists.

EW: Yes. I suppose most biographies of straight people try to show that they were more salacious than they appeared to be. Virginia Woolf who seemed very respectable was actually molested by her half brother as a child. Somerset Maugham, who appeared to be heterosexual, was actually a hardball queen who used and abused people and mistreated his wife terribly, and so on. That's the point of those biographies, I suppose. There's going to be a whole rash of biographies, someone is writing Larry Kramer's, two people are writing mine. Both of my biographers are heterosexual men so they don't have any stake in either perpetuating or deflating a gay myth.

GJ: Some people including HIV-positive gay men have suggested that gay men were the natural victims of AIDS. It is a simple step for the disease to reactivate these feelings of self-hatred and guilt that many homosexuals feel because of their sexuality. This results, partially, from the virus signifying active homosexuality. What were your initial responses to HIV/AIDS, both personally and within your work?

EW: I was certainly depressed for the first two years. I found out that I was positive in '85, and I would say that until '87 I was sort of in a funk. At that time I'd had a big failure with *Caracole*, which was my so-called straight novel that no one liked. I had invested a lot of time and effort into it and I thought that it was my best book, so I was quite shocked by the reception to it. And it precipitated the end of several important friendships, so that had left me feeling more isolated. But I think you're quite right. AIDS does activate this feeling of being a pariah and a leper, and it's very real. It is partly not just in my mind but it is in other people's minds. If I start going out with someone who's negative, either he's afraid that he'll get it and therefore he's terrified of being touched by me, or he's afraid that he won't get it, and that he'll become too attached to me and I'll die on him. So he wants to avoid the whole attachment from the very beginning. Whereas if I go out with someone who's positive, I'm oftentimes worried that they are going to die on me. Having had a lover who died last March, there are only so many times that you can go through that experience of nursing someone. Especially if your own health is problematic. So if the world of gay men breaks down into positives and negatives, there are special problems that one has with each category. The third possibility of being utterly alone isn't very inviting either. You think, "who will be there when I become ill?" And I think with most gay men what happens is that if they don't have a lover they fall into the hands of women. I am reminded of Henry James's dying words when he looked around and saw a room full of women. He said, "I feel an

absence of the male element.”

GJ: Is it potentially more powerful to write about AIDS when it is connected up to other issues—perhaps enabling the writer to reach a broader audience?

EW: I would say that it's good to link it with other issues, not for either of those reasons. Who cares what kind of audience it reaches. We're not just hucksters, we're actually trying to say what we feel. But like death itself, it's very hard to look at in a sustained way. I think that a kind of kitsch or sentimentality begins to creep in very quickly if one does look at it in a sustained way. I think that either a little protective curtain descends in the readers' minds and they go all pious on us and they say, “Oh yes ... those poor sad people,” and then they don't really feel anything more, and they let the book fall out of their hands. Certainly if you go into any gay bookstore you see stacks and stacks of unsold AIDS memoirs. Or the people do read on and the writer does write on, but you get the deathbed wedding scene, all the elements of AIDS kitsch that have become all too familiar. It's only by approaching it obliquely that one can convey the intensity of the experience.

GJ: Outspoken AIDS activist Larry Kramer has criticized your lack of AIDS activism and your defection to Paris. What are your thoughts on this?

EW: He's actually withdrawn that. After he read the Genet book he said, “Oh well ... I was wrong.” It makes a good talking point and I sort of played it up because in a way we are actually old friends. He admires my work and I admire his. The truth is that we can't all do the same thing. I think that Larry, who is himself not in the best of health, is now writing a novel, which is a big saga that will cover both pre-AIDS and post-AIDS. He was puzzled that someone who is positive would devote seven years of his life to a biography of Jean Genet. But I think he now acknowledges that we can't all do the same thing and be the same person. Thank God there is a Larry Kramer, or a Peter Blazey. We need those people, but we don't need lots of them.

GJ: Have the young made a better go of being gay than the older generations?

EW: Yes, I do think that there was a tremendous amount of self-hatred before Stonewall and it was almost universal. I think now there is a lot of exuberance in being gay. In Sydney people are really on a roll. The gay people really feel excited about who they are and what they're doing. There's this kind of desire to take over and run everything and be everything. If you think in terms of where people's energies are going, at least people now have energy to spare, as it's not all going into self-hatred as it might have in the fifties.

GJ: If the beautiful room was empty at the time of Stonewall—has it been refilled and by what?

EW: Well ... All I can talk about is my own immediate experience which is mainly French now, and English to some degree. By and large most of what I see is very positive. I think that the coming together of the gay and lesbian community over the fight against AIDS has been remarkable. I think that the presence of lesbians and gays as a political entity and force is admirable.

What is not so positive is cultural coercion. I would say that one form of coercion is not only to be beautiful but also to be normal and happy. The truth is for many people, because they were raised by conservative Christian families, or because they have a complicated psychology that has nothing to do with them being gay, they have a lot of personality problems. At least there used to

be permission to be miserable. Now there's not even that. Now you are really supposed to get it together.

There is also a greater conformity in gay life than ever before. There is less tolerance for other minority groups and less interest in other minority groups than there used to be. Figures like Pasolini and Genet used to be able to generalize from their own oppression to the oppression of other third-world people, and be real spokespeople for them. Now the gay community is, in a sense, too self-centered to really be interested in that. The only place that it really extends beyond its borders is in dealing with other groups that are affected by AIDS. Even there, I feel that the black African has been forgotten by everybody. Nobody much seems that worried about their AIDS.

Edmund White in Conversation

Mark Ford / 1996

From *PN Review* 111 (September–October 1996): 22–25. Reprinted by permission.

Mark Ford: You've currently got two biographers on your trail. How does that feel?

Edmund White: Well, my nephew is one of my biographers, and he's doing a fairly traditional biography, with a lot of emphasis on my childhood because he has access to my sister—who's his mother—and to me, and I think he's very interested in the family and the family background, so I find he's rather disappointingly uninterested in my literary career—but in any event, he's only half-way through the book. The other one is Stephen Barber, who's doing a book for Picador; he's English and he's more interested in the European years, that is since 1983, and in my writing.

MF: Your own fiction often uses the forms and voice of autobiography. Are you worried lest your biographers' versions of your life clash with autofictions—to use your own term—such as *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*?

EW: I just hope they'll be as fair with me as I feel I was with Genet. Genet was also somebody who wrote autofiction and he often departed wildly from the facts. In my biography of him I tried to show that he always had an artistic reason for doing so. I think my own main changes have been towards making myself more of a representative or normal kind of person, less of an egghead or weirdo, and less precociously sexual too.

MF: Do you feel autofiction is a particularly American genre?

EW: Yes, certainly the business of the discovery and avowal of the self is ... Michel Foucault was a friend of mine, and I often think that if he'd really known my work he would have disapproved, because one of his ideas was of the construction of the self rather than the revelation of the self, and he was in favor of the idea of the self as an artifact rather than the self as an avowal. But on the other hand I think that dual aspect of both creating a new self and discovering an old one are both in my writing—all of which is very peculiar given the fact that I started off as a Buddhist, and not believing in the self at all.

MF: In what ways have your Buddhist beliefs affected your social views?

EW: Well, a lot of the thinking of this last twenty years about social constructionism—or whatever that word is—seemed to me almost overobvious. I couldn't understand what all the fuss was about, because I think that was very much my view from the beginning. And I think already in a book like *Forgetting Elena*, which came out in 1973, you see that as a totally worked-up view of things.

MF: John Ashbery described the society depicted in *Forgetting Elena* as “terminally sophisticated.” Would you agree with that?

EW: Sure, I think that's such a funny phrase ... *Forgetting Elena* was based on *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*—the diary of a tenth-century Japanese courtier

—and that was certainly a terminally sophisticated society, and one in which aesthetics had entirely replaced ethics. That was something that interested me. I was seeing it in a double vision with Fire Island, which is a gay beach resort just outside New York, in which people pretended to be just plain folks wearing sawed off blue jeans and clogs, and yet one person would be the president of a bank and the next person would be an out-of-work hustler, and you never knew which was which because everyone was dressed alike, unless you were in on everything, and then you'd see that there were tremendous distinctions of rank, but they were very, very subtle.

MF: Do you feel the book is a critique of the society it depicts?

EW: I think there's a kind of ambiguity always. For instance, take a writer like Proust who felt that he himself was a great critic of snobism, and yet could also be seen as an apostle of snobism. I suppose when you're up to your eyeballs in something, it's questionable whether you're endorsing it or criticizing it. In my own writing I've always tried to tackle subjects that I felt in two minds about. To me a writer like Arthur Miller is loathsome because he seems to have decided everything in advance, and he has very traditional moral views about everything. I once heard Saul Bellow give a very interesting lecture about Dostoevsky in which he said that the great thing about Dostoevsky is that—if he was a novelist of ideas, they were ideas that he wasn't too sure that he really believed. There was a letter that Dostoevsky wrote during the composition of *Brothers Karamazov* where he said: "Now I've given all the best arguments I can think of to the Grand Inquisitor I can't think of any arguments for my own side!" I think that's an admirable position. In the same way in *Forgetting Elena* I was very interested in the question of sincerity, and how can you be sincere at all in a society where you're constantly being looked at, and where you're very self-conscious about what effect you're making.

MF: Can that kind of self-division exist within a fiction based on autobiographical material?

EW: Well, in *The Farewell Symphony*, the novel I'm working on now, there's a scene, for instance, where the protagonist's mother has cancer, and he goes home and is very angry about being swallowed up by his family, because he's so conscious of having created a new personality and a new world for himself, one that's totally free of his family; so that to go back to the Midwest from New York, and to have to laugh at all the same old jokes and suffer the same old humiliations is terribly dispiriting. At the same time he's very aware of this contradiction between a received self and a constructed one.

MF: The book follows on from *A Boy's Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*?

EW: Yes. It's named after the Haydn symphony. I think it's in the second movement, or maybe the third, that all the instrumentalists get up and leave the stage one after another leaving only one left to play. And that seemed to me like a good metaphor for being the one witness of my generation still living, I mean in New York at least ... It's a long book, I think it'll be longer than the other two put together. It's much more detailed, and more sociological, because in *A Boy's Own Story* you barely know where or when it's taking place, and though these things become much more concrete in *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, nevertheless I was so concerned not to have a dull book, one that didn't have pace, that I cut it back almost too much. In this one, maybe because I feel it's the end of the

series, I'm writing it in a much fuller way. Also, there's a feeling that I'm no longer writing for my contemporaries, since they're all dead, that I'm writing for another generation that never knew any of this, so I can't just refer to it, I have to render it—so when I mention something like the Mineshaft I actually feel I have to say what it was, because I don't think sex clubs like that exist anymore. There is a kind of sociological impulse behind this, as I think there is in almost all my writing. A lot of people who reviewed the Genet biography were struck by the fact that I was less interested in him as a psychological mechanism, and more interested in him as a product of the various worlds he passed through. I don't actually believe in individual psychology that much. I see people as more tribal than individual. And I think that it's a kind of self-delusion on the part of artists that they're unique individuals. All you have to do is look at any period that's sufficiently in the past to see that there are enormous resemblances between somebody like Voltaire and Laclos, that all eighteenth-century writers sound more or less alike, and yet in their own minds they had enormous dissensions. With the focusing of time you begin to see people as much more products of their era than of individual circumstances.

MF: Where did the idea for *Caracole* come from?

EW: It was a very complicated layering of influences and things. It was the first book I wrote almost entirely in Europe. I had moved to Paris in the summer of '83 and began *Caracole* then, and it must have been finished by '85, although the first chapter I had written many years before in the 1970s, and had abandoned it because I couldn't figure out what to do with it. Jimmy Merrill always felt that it didn't go with the book, and that I should have gotten rid of it. But the idea behind it was the very Foucauldian idea of showing people being, well, uncoded, coded, then decoded—in other words the uncoded part was that Edenic state in the first chapter when Gabriel and Angelica don't know who they are or what sex is even, but make up theories as they go along. Then the second long section is Gabriel and Angelica separately being educated and initiated into this sinister, dark world, and the end of it is when Gabriel sees through it all and is decoded, that is begins to see how arbitrary and conventional it all is, and that happens when he becomes aware of the difference between the rulers and the ruled ... I'd spent a lot of time in Venice over the years, starting in the early 1970s, with David Kalstone. We were living in the Palazzo Barbaro, and they had an interesting little library of seventeenth-century books, books of anecdotes written by Venetians, so I would read those and that would get me going, and then I was also rereading a lot of classics that I hadn't read in years, like Stendhal, especially *The Charterhouse of Parma*, and I was interested in showing a city like Venice under the Austrians, or like Paris under the Nazis, or like Peking under the Manchus, in which the conquered people were superior to their conquerors, and even the conquerors were slightly intimidated by the superior culture of their subjects ... I'd also been reading a lot of eighteenth-century French pornographic fiction, like Crébillon, or Diderot's *Les Bijoux Indiscrets*, and it seemed to me the men were all so gay; they were all heterosexual and yet their foppishness and even their thinking of love and sex as a kind of battle or conquest struck me as very gay. And the shortlivedness of the rapport between the men and women seemed to me also very gay, and so I thought it would be interesting to write about this highly charged erotic world in which those eighteenth-century aspects were translated into my terms, and yet it was all heterosexual—because why not?

MF: Was it liberating for you to explore such a different world?

EW: It was liberating in many ways. If you write autobiographical fiction, then normally you only identify with the I, and all the other people are seen in a rather objective and even alienated way, whereas if you write in the third person—*Caracole* is my only third-person novel as well as my only heterosexual novel—if you write in the third person about six very powerful figures like that, then you're able to distribute yourself over all six of them, and you set in motion a kind of drama or conflict—a dramatization of your own inner conflicts—rather than ascribing all of that to one undramatized figure.

MF: To go back a bit, the prose of *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, published in 1978, is often very clotted, almost hallucinatory, and the story-line keeps vanishing, while your next novel, *A Boy's Own Story* (1982), is written in a much more lucid, precise style. What prompted this development?

EW: I think it was almost like feeling the pressure of history. It's hard to reconstruct the moment, because now there are so many coming-out novels that everyone's fed up with them, but at that moment there really wasn't a coming-out novel, a kind of *bildungsroman* about a homosexual coming of age, and it was like there was this empty ecological niche that was screaming to be filled. I belonged to this writers' group called the Violet Quill—there were seven of us who were all gay writers, and that's when I was writing *A Boy's Own Story*. There was in general this new self-consciousness about gay literature, that it was a possible genre. In 1978 six or seven gay books—including Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* and Larry Kramer's *Faggots*—were published that all announced the beginning of this movement, but I still thought the most obvious book hadn't been written, and once I began to write it I became aware of a kind of historical necessity. It sounds so ridiculous and pretentious to say it, but there comes a moment when you start writing a book like that and think—"Gee, I really don't want to fuck this up, by getting too arty ..." You feel that destiny has put things in your hands—Toni Morrison must have felt something similar when she wrote *Beloved*—you suddenly feel seized by these extraliterary concerns.

MF: When you started writing in the sixties, what aspects of contemporary writing did you find inspiring, and what seemed to you outdated and constricting?

EW: Well, I was so desperate to be published, I was probably more eager to second-guess the market than to reform things. I was very interested then in writers like John Barth, Robert Coover, Rudolf Wurlitzer—I actually wanted to write a book on those guys—plus Donald Barthelme, and I think now I don't like any of them. At the time I saw them as an avant-garde, and the concept of the avant-garde still meant something to me, and seemed exhilarating, and *Forgetting Elena* was written very much under that aegis. Then the *nouveau roman* also interested me, especially *Jealousy* by Alain Robbe-Grillet—that was a book I felt was a masterpiece. There were other writers I liked very much like Isherwood, Nabokov, even John Rechy, whom I found much more traditional technically, and then some oddball writers who influenced me a lot, like Burroughs ... In the main, though, I had a rather dutiful attitude towards contemporary literature—I just read everything rather uncritically.

MF: You wrote a number of plays back in the sixties, and more recently *Trios* which was performed here a couple of years ago. What first attracted you to the

theatre?

EW: When I was still in college I wrote a play called *The Blue Boy in Black* and that won a Hopwood Award—which was one of the best literary prizes in America for a college student—and so made it into the *New York Times*, and through that I got an agent and got a production. I was only twenty-three years old, and this play was done—it had a run of a month and got fairly good reviews, but because it all happened for me so young, I thought—“Gee, this is exciting, let’s do more of this.” So then I wrote many plays, none of which got put on, or even read. I didn’t know anyone important. I was very backward and shy, and I didn’t know how to meet people. I’d gone to the wrong schools, and I was living in New York which in those days was very much East Coast Establishment.

MF: Have your theatrical writings had much influence on your fiction, do you think?

EW: Yes, definitely, I think I conceive things in terms of scenes, and I don’t use much dialogue, but I like to think that when I do, I use it in a theatrical way—that is I try to individualize it, and I try to dramatize it ... I think in drama all dialogue is either aimed to deceive the other characters, or is self-deceiving, and the viewer is amused to see through the stratagems.

MF: Was Tennessee Williams an influence in this?

EW: Yes, and still is.

MF: In a recent preface to a new edition of *A Boy’s Own Story*, you say the chapters surfaced in your mind like Rilkean elegies, “momentous and unbidden ...”

EW: Oh, I didn’t mean to suggest they were so exalted or good, I only meant that I wrote them in that way—I was so drunk all the time that if I could get it together to write, well, it seemed like a Rilkean elegy; then I’d subside into silence for another six months ...

MF: How important was the writing of your gay travelogue, *States of Desire*, in your development?

EW: I think it was very important, because it meant that I was going all across the country meeting gay people. I was very aware of the audience, whom exactly I was writing about and for. I think it gave me a sense of a public. It also technically taught me how to do quick sketches of people, somewhat like being a sidewalk artist, and I think that’s a skill that I’ve kept.

MF: What were the reasons behind your move to Paris in 1983?

EW: Well, I won a Guggenheim, just for one year, and I went to France, and almost right away got a job working for American *Vogue* doing the letter from Paris. Then I felt I was at a point in my life when I could either stay in New York, and keep on doing the same thing, being a professor and so on, and sort of go through my forties and fifties that way, or I could start all over again, and go from being a teacher to being a student—I had to learn French—become a journalist again, which makes you much more on the *qui vive* than being a professor, as you have to get out, interview people, scramble around ... Then all my friends in New York started dying, and I sort of enjoyed this funny distance from New York, I enjoyed not being there ... There’s something very dream-like about Paris—it’s a beautiful, gay-colored city, and it’s a middle-aged city, not a

youth-oriented city. I find it endlessly fascinating, mysterious, and interesting.

MF: Do you feel living in Europe has changed your writing?

EW: Yes, I think Americans are very interested in romantic individualism, and the more sociological, historical, or cultural analysis that I seem to like is more European ... Also, you see America more clearly when you've lived abroad. And I've always wanted to preserve my status as a minor writer—which seems to me very precious, because it means you don't have to worry about whether you're representative of Americans, whether you're in the great tradition or whatever, or whether you're really writing the most important books of your generation. And to me, writing about expatriates living in Paris, as I did in *Skinned Alive*, is an interesting subject. I'd enjoy writing a whole novel like that—a comic novel about Americans trying to understand French people, though I don't think most Americans would be interested because most Americans are only interested in America. To them Europe is just a kind of Disneyland.

MF: Finally, may I ask what appealed to you about the life and work of Genet?

EW: I do think he's a very good writer. He's a writer who probably doesn't have any of the normal novelistic skills. There's almost nothing that drags you along—you read a page and you're frozen with admiration, and you don't really want to turn the page. He is intelligent, which isn't often the case with fiction writers, and I think that almost any sentence is a unit of thought, as it is with Nabokov, as it is with Proust. You feel you're actually in the presence of a sovereign intellect, somebody that's really thinking, and making you reexamine things. Some people find his reversal of all moral values much too systematic, and boring for that reason, but I don't. I find it subtle and curious, and I feel there's a lot of affection for his characters that keeps the books from being too programmatic. I think my favorite book is *Funeral Rites*. It's like Orpheus and Eurydice—it deals with life and death and love, and it's very mythical, while remaining very concrete and even humble in its details. I first became interested in him in the 1960s. Of the options that were available to a gay person in those days—you could either be sick, or evil, or sinful. And everyone—middle-class writers that is—chose sick, as this seemed an invitation to sympathy, whereas he chose the other two which was a much stronger position. I found that exhilarating. There was a feeling that here was a genuine rebel—a Lucifer.

MF: And your more timorous side was emboldened by that?

EW: Yes, definitely.

Edmund White

Ron Hogan / 1997

From *Beatrice*, 1997, <http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/whitee/>. Reprinted by permission.

“Genet wrote four autobiographical novels,” Edmund White, who’s written a comprehensive biography of the French author, tells me, “and when he came close to the point in his life at which he became a published writer, he stopped writing altogether. It’s as if that didn’t fit into his idea of what writing was about or what he was about.” The subject comes up as we’re discussing White’s new novel, *The Farewell Symphony*, the third in a series of autobiographical novels that began with *A Boy’s Own Story* and *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, and which seems as large in size and scope as both of those novels combined. White fictionalizes his early attempts to write and publish his fiction within the heady (no pun intended) milieu of gay New York of the late sixties and seventies. He also pushes ahead, past his first publication, into the beginnings of the AIDS crisis and the deaths of many of his friends and lovers (the novel takes its title from a Haydn symphony which ends with all of the orchestra leaving the stage except for two violins). White makes no apologies for the promiscuity of the past, however, and in fact deals with it, as he deals with everything, with a combination of frankness and lyricism that conveys the carnal and intellectual passions of his life. It was daunting, he admits, but “when you get to the moment in a series of autobiographical fictions that you become a published writer, you have to swallow hard and decide whether you have the courage and resourcefulness to go on with that or abandon the whole project. So I tried to go on.”

Ron Hogan: Let’s start with a quote from the book. “The writer’s vanity holds that everything that happens to him is material. He views everything from a distance, and even when the cops arrest him for sucking a cock through a gloryhole, he smiles faintly and thinks, ‘Idea for Story.’ As he submerges himself in the bilge of everyday life, all its disorder and tedium, he holds his thumb out at arm’s length and squints, as if to get a take on this patch of swarming nonsense. Each new occurrence offers a new end to the story, in the light of which everything that proceeds must be revised.” That paragraph, to me, essentially sums up this novel.

Edmund White: I think I’ve always been somebody who led his life as though it were a novel or going to become one, so I’m always looking for pattern and repetition or meaning in what is, of course, the essentially indeterminate swarming madness of life. And several times in the trilogy, I’ve talked about how, if there is a devil, he’s not somebody in a bright red suit with a tail. He’s some man in a T-shirt sitting in a room at midday watching daytime television. What’s really scary and frightening is boredom and the idea that the world is really winding down through entropy. And what art does is to go in the opposite direction—to inject energy, find pattern, lend meaning and vitality into what seems tepid.

RH: As the conclusion of the trilogy, this is more than a continuation of the first two books. In previous interviews, you've discussed how, with each new book, you're struggling to carry your own mastery of the form a bit further, and in this book you've pushed yourself to write in ways you've never written before.

EW: For one thing, I never dared to talk about art and writing [in my fiction] before. I had that typical American mistrust of anything that was too cultural or arty, a feeling that the subject would only be of vague professional interest to a few other writers. But then, I'm writing a little biography of Proust, and have been rereading Proust recently. He talks so much about his vocation as a writer; it's one of the main themes of his work. And he compares everybody he meets to paintings he's seen. So I thought, why not break my own rule, and take on art as a subject?

RH: It's interesting to watch you look back on the transition from Edmund White, struggling writer, to "Edmund White, gay literary icon."

EW: Well, I haven't really—either in this book or anything else I've done—come up to *that* part. My protagonist has still just published his first novel and is struggling to make ends meet. And I can't say that I'm *that* far away from that in my own life, even now. My reputation is still very much under attack, which I like—I think it shows that you're still a living, vital writer if you still irritate people.

RH: The reaction from the gay right, who charge the book with sexual immorality, is particularly interesting, because to you or me, the counterargument might seem obvious. These are books about a certain historical era in which the morality was simply different.

EW: Yes. I want to do a book about Brice, the lover who dies of AIDS in this book, because when I got to the end, I didn't want to tack his story on to what was already a very exhausting, long book. (At least I was exhausted by writing it, if the reader isn't exhausted by reading it.) And when I do write that book, I think people will be taken aback by how little sex there is in it. But when you have a lover who's sick with AIDS and dying, you don't have much sex with him, because he's not well enough, and you would feel rotten going out to have sex with other people, so you basically enter a period of several years of chastity. People who nudge each other in the ribs and say, "Ooh la la, Paris!" when they read this book will be shocked by how little sex there is in the next one.

But my point is that you write what's appropriate to each decade, and to that moment in your own life. You don't try to even them all out. I think it's ridiculous to try to rewrite the past so that it comes out as a kind of position paper about contemporary sexual mores.

RH: That historical honesty is just one facet of a broader intellectual and emotional honesty that's really essential to a project of this nature. Even though you deploy certain fictional techniques of conflating and diffusing traits from real people into fictional characters, those techniques are in service of a broader truth.

EW: That's right. You don't want to bother people with every last little detail of your life, and I try to concentrate on just a few themes, like the development of a writer, the importance of friendship to a gay man, how he comes to terms with his biological family, the development of his sexual orientation ... Those are the themes I concentrated on, and although there were a lot of other things

happening in my life, as there are in any life, I left them out. In the period this book covers, for example, I was living in San Francisco for a while, working as an editor at *Saturday Review*, I was an editor at *Horizon* in New York, I was in touch with Nabokov and other writers ... but I left that all out because it didn't seem relevant.

RH: Had you wanted to tackle biographical projects before your Genet book?

EW: No, and I wouldn't do another big, thorough biography again like the one I did on Genet, at least not one that was so difficult. Genet was probably the most difficult biography anyone could have undertaken. Most literary biographies are about somebody who's middle-class, whose mother starts collecting his juvenilia the minute he starts producing it, then moves on from success to success and is surrounded by other writers who all keep journals and record every thought and conversation. Genet was entirely different—a foundling placed in a peasant home who became a juvenile delinquent very quickly and was sent off to reform school, and spent many years in prison. The people who knew him in those days either died young, as people tend to do when they're criminals or members of the underclass, or impossible to locate, or wouldn't talk if you did locate them, or wanted to be paid, or didn't tell you the truth ... No biography could have been more difficult, which is why it took seven years to complete, only one of which was actually spent writing.

I'd never do something like that again, but this little book on Proust [I'm working on] is part of a series that Viking Penguin is launching of one-hundred-page biographical studies of important people, not just writers, by contemporary recognized writers, which seems to me a fun thing to do.

I think, though, that writing the Genet biography influenced the composition of *The Farewell Symphony* in that when I started to write the biography, I thought, "How am I ever going to get a coherent life, a sense of a book that hangs together, out of all these bits and pieces I've collected in research?" What amazed me is that if you start at the beginning of somebody's life and chronologically go to the end, and trace out certain lines of development emotionally, no matter where you go, it all seems to hang together. A person is something like a coat rack—you can keep putting garments on it, but it's still a recognizable object. That made me more daring in this book to go off in all sorts of little directions, as long as I maintained the throughline of the narrator's emotional and intellectual development.

RH: It frees you up to go back and forth in time and subject matter in ... well, I guess the obvious adjective to describe it is "Proustian."

EW: I hope so. It's nice of you to say.

RH: Do you feel, because of your seropositive status, that there's only so much more time for new projects ...?

EW: (*interrupts*) Well, I'm fifty-seven, and I think that anybody at that age will sort of feel that a bit. I've always felt that Nabokov, my idol, did his best book, *Lolita*, in his mid-fifties, and then the next book he did, *Pale Fire*, was pretty damn good, too. So I've always felt that if I lived long enough, I'd do my best work in my fifties. That seems to me the right time for a writer as ambitious as I am, who wants to write not only about an individual but also about society, who wants to tackle certain subjects essayistically within a novel, and wants to cover a large period of time ... it's very hard to do that when you're very young. Some writers can pull it off, as Balzac did, but they're geniuses; I'm not, and all

I can do is slowly work up to it. I think that for most writers, that comes together in their fifties.

Now, I don't know. I feel that, if I were told I had to die in a month, I wouldn't feel that I'd failed to fulfill my promise [as a writer]. But I'd regret dying. I enjoy life and I feel I have a lot of other projects to do. [In addition to the Proust booklet and the novel about Brice,] I'm doing a collection of interviews with famous gay men. I've already done David Geffen, Elton John, and some important painters like Cy Twombly.

RH: In many nonfiction pieces over the years, you've been concerned with issues concerning gay fiction and the "gay canon."

EW: In one of the essays in *The Burning Library*, I say that the whole idea of a gay canon is distasteful to me because I feel that a canon is for people who don't like to read much. They want to know the absolute minimum list of classics so they can read them and be done with reading. Whereas people who really love to read, like me or like you, are always asking friends if they've read anything good recently, always trying to expand our list of books, open ourselves to new talent. I spend a lot of time each year reviewing books, so I can come across a lot of new writers—straight and gay—and I love finding out what other people are doing and thinking.

As far as the gay canon is concerned, I think the whole project is misguided. What people are trying to do is take a traditional canon that begins with Homer and goes through Dante and Shakespeare, and then tack on to this tradition of gay white men a few living or recently dead gay men. I think what should be done is that we should abandon the whole notion of a canon and embrace the full implications of a multicultural society, which is not just to bring in one Asian American or two African Americans to this sacred list, but to let our reading become as promiscuous as the nation is itself.

RH: You also make the point in *The Farewell Symphony* that the canonization of gay literature also leads to its ghettoization. When Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* came out ...

EW: ... it was read by everybody and reviewed by everybody. But now I hear from one gay writer after another that the *New York Times* won't even review his book. There's a trend of frustration. In order to enter into a national discourse about books, if such a thing exists, the feeling is that you have to breach that threshold of the *Times*, and if you don't, you feel somehow excluded. I'm not sure things really work that way—the *Times* has reviewed and crowned many books that have been entirely forgotten, while other books they've ignored or dismissed in "Books in Brief" have crept up on us and established themselves as books we need to read.

Obviously, in the immediate response to a book, and to its sales, this matters, but ... I'm reading a biography of Keats right now, and he sold something like fifty copies of *Hyperion*. Virginia Woolf sold only ten thousand copies of *The Years*. The writers of the past had very small sales. If a book sold five to seven thousand copies, it was a huge bestseller. In our age, where everything's so gargantuan, we think a book has to have huge sales to have any impact, but I don't think history bears that out.

RH: And the larger danger seems to me, as you mention in the same passage, being confined to two shelves in the back of the bookstore.

EW: I always wonder whether, if a straight man wanted to read me, he'd have

the courage, especially if he lives in a smaller town, to go to the “gay fiction” section and pick up my book, which has a sort of “gay cover” on it, then stand in line behind ten other people to buy it—or if it would feel like some sort of “confession.” And I don’t think people felt that way about buying and reading James Baldwin or Gore Vidal in the fifties. People just assumed that those books were books like any others.

RH: You mentioned this in your *Paris Review* interview, and I was fascinated by it—you’re one of the few writers I’ve met who likes to read when you’re writing.

EW: I feel like it fills up the word banks that might be draining dry otherwise. Colette, Nabokov, Isherwood, and Proust are talismanic writers for me, and of all those writers, perhaps Colette the most is somebody who, when I feel that I’m running out of words or no longer taking any pleasure in life, I read her and it gives me that shock of how beautiful the sensual and sensuous world around us is. She communicates that so perfectly—she’s probably the most visual of verbal artists.

Of course, right now I’m reading Proust, and all the other stuff around him, his letters, various biographies ... I reviewed Alain de Botton’s *How Proust Can Change Your Life* and I think it’s a terrific little book. It’s very high concept, and he’s able to impose his own concept onto a writer who could so easily swamp a writer. It’s very important to take these giants and wrestle them down to some sort of manageable size.

Edmund White: The Man Who Wrote *The Married Man*

Christopher Matthew Hennessy / 2001

From *Provincetown Arts*, 2001, 66–70. Reprinted by permission.

For many writers, self-revelation can be the great tightrope act, and few reveal much so compellingly as Edmund White. His newest book, *The Married Man*, traces the experiences of fifty-something Austin, an American furniture scholar (White's stand-in), and his younger French lover, the titular character, Julien. Based on his life with illustrator Hubert Sorin, the book is a searing love story, an AIDS tragedy, and a subtle commentary on the nature of commitment and love. White visited the Cape last summer to sign books at the Provincetown Bookshop, to film a segment of PBS's *In the Life*, and to relax with fellow writers and friends in Dennis. Here we conducted this narrative of disclosure that ends in an intersection of contradictions.

Christopher Matthew Hennessy: Let's start with an easy truth. What do you think of Provincetown?

Edmund White: Well, Provincetown, since the turn of the century, has been a center for artistic and bohemian life. This area has always been a home for painters and writers: just off the top of my head I can think of Hopper, Hans Hofmann, Eugene O'Neill, Cyrus Cassells, Mark Doty, Michael Cunningham. And you know the Provincetown Bookshop since 1904 has been a really excellent literary bookstore, which is unusual for a town the size of Provincetown. My own feeling is that gays until the 1960s found acceptance only in bohemian cultures in America, so it's no accident that a place like Provincetown has attracted both a gay community and a community of artists. Also, it seems as if gays find themselves at "end of the line" cities; going east it's Provincetown, goes west it's San Francisco, and going south it's Key West. We're looking for happiness, whether we find it or not.

CMH: In your new book, the main character, Austin, has a moment of crisis when his lover collapses, shocked that he snapped, sobbing, "I can't, I don't." Please go back to that moment and talk about what it means, as a writer, to reactivate moments of personal crisis.

EW: That moment occurred exactly that way. As the book goes along, it becomes almost photographic in its realism and autobiography. I remember distinctly being in Quarzazate in front of the hotel and trying to get Hubert into the hotel, and then he collapsed on the lawn. I felt my will was so strong—I'd become sort of tyrannical and self-deluded to the point of craziness. Suddenly, when my will couldn't save him and he collapsed, I had this feeling of stuttering into madness. How does it feel to recreate those moments in a novel? I probably felt some control over myself *because* I was writing it. Freud has this theory of the repetition compulsion. When children play with dolls, let's say, they don't often use wish fulfillment; they don't always present the mother being loving to the daughter. Sometimes they'll have the mother spanking the daughter as she

really does in real life.

CMH: What's human and compelling about Austin is his greatest fear: not of losing Julien, but discovering truly the depth of his love. Is anything more terrifying?

EW: It's hard to live with burning intimacy, day-in and day-out. Tolstoy says couples fight with each other right after sex because they feel ashamed for having sex at all; he thought couples should be chaste. He describes a real phenomenon, but for the wrong reasons. People do fight after sex or after a great weekend, but it's not that they're ashamed of having sex; they're afraid of continuing intimacy. Can you go on living at that white-hot pitch? Aren't you afraid of becoming dependent on the other person and being completely absorbed by them? AIDS adds to the problem because you know the other person is going to die. (I'm talking about that period before the new treatments.) In that period, people did know that AIDS was a death-sentence, and so, as somebody who lived with and loved a man who was dying of AIDS, I did think, "I'm being very foolish putting all my eggs in this basket, because the basket is about to break in half." When one partner has AIDS, it's isolating. Your friends begin to drop you; they're afraid of the disease, but also because the sick person doesn't have the energy to see anybody else and becomes very possessive of his lover.

CMH: You've said your fantasies are replays of your sexual "greatest hits," that they oftentimes involve people who have died, that in a sense you're making love to ghosts. Do you feel haunted?

EW: I do feel haunted, but maybe that's normal for somebody sixty years old. Yesterday I had lunch alone in a restaurant. I sat next to a lady who started talking to me. She was speaking Spanish to another lady, so I could tell she wasn't herself Spanish. It turns out she was a retired Spanish teacher. She said she loved to go back to Spain because it reminded her of her youth and it made her forget her age. I suppose that's part of the pleasure in replaying these scenes, sometimes the most vivid moments of your life. Just as they remain loaded with erotic possibilities, those memories have poetic art. Being haunted isn't bad, isn't a thing that makes you want to give up living, nor even necessarily is it a consolation for life. Being haunted may be life itself.

CMH: The sweetness of living?

EW: Exactly. Last night I was making love to this boy; he had the same smell of the skin, the same feel of the skin as Jim Ruddy, who died of AIDS. I knew him in my twenties when he was in his twenties, two years younger than I was. He was a big, tall, blond swimmer, also a Rhodes Scholar, a genius—fascinating guy; and *the* great love of my life. Last night, there was a doubling of experience because I kept seeing this guy as the double of Jim.

CMH: The painting of the man walking his dog, on the cover of *The Married Man*, seems to echo one of Julien's paintings—a brilliant touch to have your character produce the book's image on the book's dust jacket.

EW: I went to a museum in Aix-en-Provence, and the museum earlier had had a show by Stephen Conroy, a young Scottish painter. In the catalog I saw this picture called "The Architect's Dog." The figure had the brooding good looks of Jimmy Dean and he looked enough like Hubert Sorin that it freaked me out. I knew he would have liked the picture; it's very brooding. I was pleased we were

able to get the rights for it from Marlborough Gallery. Having already chosen the cover before I finished the book, I got to the part where Julien becomes a painter; I thought I would *mise en abyme*. It's a technical term from heraldry. Let's say you have a shield with a lion's head and cross. In the center of the shield you'll put the lion's head and the cross in miniature. That's called "to place it in the abyss." I thought I'd do *mise en abyme* of this painting. Since it's already the cover of this book, I'll have a character create it too.

CMH: *The Married Man* makes us evaluate commitment, the idea of bonding "as long as you both shall live." With the current public dialogue about gay marriage, could this book become part of that dialogue?

EW: I have a shaded position. I am not an assimilationist. I believe gays have a special destiny; they contribute to society by living outside it. But I defend the effort of gays to get married. If they want to get married, I would die for their right to do it. I feel marriage is one of the most sacred institutions of our society. If gays manage to legalize marriage, it will mean major change in the foundations of society. Where gay marriage has really succeeded is in France with the PACS, a domestic union law that was passed last year. When originally proposed to the lawmakers, it was rejected because it was uniquely a gay marriage bill, but when it was rephrased and brought back as the PAC, they did pass it. Why? Because they cleverly figured out that the French believe in an abstract universal citizen. They phrased it to say, "Any couple of two people who live together for more than three years should be able to enjoy all the benefits of marriage, except adoption." They included lesbians and gays, and a mother and daughter who lived together, or two brothers who lived together, or any two people, who lived together, like a straight couple. They simply extended the benefit package of one partner to the other member, including inheritance possibilities, very important in France because of the Napoleonic code.

CMH: What will people say Edmund White said about commitment in this book?

EW: Some heterosexuals, particularly benighted, imagine gays are incapable of commitment. My story is about two people *utterly* committed to each. Wear-and-tear on the relationship happens because caretaking and dying are painful, worse if the person dying is young with much to give. Nevertheless, I would love to imagine a heterosexual lawmaker who'd never much thought about these things, yet who feels slightly different when he votes the next day.

CMH: Who would want to fall in love with someone who wants to marry you?

EW: I'm an old-fashioned bohemian. I often fall in love with younger guys. They have fairly bohemian values. I could not fall in love with a Republican. I couldn't really do it. My erection wilts the minute I find out somebody's far right. Bruce Bawer or Andrew Sullivan are neoconservatives; sexually I find that a turn-off. Both are nice, intelligent men, but I am not "turned on" by their views. I could hardly imagine falling in love with somebody who would want to get married.

CMH: I finished your book on a flight back from a wedding—my true love married someone else. There I am reading about Austin flying back to Paris: Julien is dead, Peter is dying, and this asshole George is crying on Austin's shoulder. Suddenly I'm crying too. God blesses catharsis, but once again your

Austin is taking care of all us. Please rewrite the ending so that Austin is comforted.

EW: The way I originally wrote it—and my editor made me change it—was that Austin and George both have erections at the end when Austin is comforting George. That's what happened in real life. It was going to be this sexual *renouveau*, some sort of comfort, with a glamorous, attractive man (even though he was a brat and a baby). Several of my friends read it and hated that ending. Diane Johnson, who wrote *Le Divorce* and *Le Marriage* and whose work parallels my own (she and her husband are both experts on AIDS and wrote one of the first major articles about AIDS for the *New York Review of Books*), said, "Oh, you know, let's not have him get into all of this; it's going to put off readers. It suggests a whole other novel." She's not at all a prude or uninformed. I like suggesting a whole other novel; there would be some life left for Austin. But several people—all of them heterosexual, I might add—told me this. I thought okay, if ten people tell you you're drunk, then you lie down on the barroom floor.

CMH: You underscore the point of view of the other, even in little things like the narrator's need to translate some French into English. When friends surround your characters, when they're most charming, they possess this hyperawareness, or delusion, of being the outsider.

EW: One reason people take ecstasy and go dancing is to experience this tribal feeling of sweaty bodies rubbing against each other. For five minutes on the dance floor you *can* feel as if you belong to a tribe. Is this a desirable state? When I was five years old, if I could have chosen between being an insider and outsider, I would have chosen to be an insider. But I have lived my whole life as an outsider. I have become used to the distance of the artist, an awareness that depends on critical distance. Last night at dinner we were talking about people who fall in love hopelessly and how that later makes them artists. I said, "Maybe the reason people fall in love, hopelessly, is so that they *can* be artists. Maybe they are already artists: that's why they fall in love; hopeless love gives distance between you and the beloved. The space can fill up with your creative imagination. You can imagine what the other feels. You try to second-guess his behavior, acutely observing everything he does, inventing homage to woo him. Of course, homage works on everybody else but him. Here is a fertile space that reciprocated love doesn't provide.

CMH: You've written a biography on Proust. Admit to one guilty pleasure you have had in your life.

EW: I'm quite a serious cook. I like giving dinner parties. My boyfriend and a lot of my friends feel it's a horrible waste of time. Why do I do it so much? I get worn out. I'll overdo it because I want a fifth course. If I do two or three dinner parties in the same week it can be a nightmare. Most of my lovers get fed up with me because it's too social, too many interruptions, the phone never stops ringing, people never stop arriving. Can't we just kick back? I never kick back, but it's true I feel guilty about this compulsion to be so social.

CMH: You are a social figure who writes supremely entertaining novels.

EW: Virgil Thompson used to say you can have lots of friends, or you can have a lover, or you can be an artist. You could have two of the three, but you can't have all three. I've always tried to have all three, and I'm not sure I've succeeded. I oftentimes drive my lovers crazy because of too much going on. I

think, maybe I could have been a better artist if I had calmed down more. But being diagnosed as HIV told me that I wanted to have fun; I didn't want to just be an artist. A lot of writers have this desire to concentrate entirely on their work in their remaining years; they want to leave behind a monument to themselves. That's cold consolation after you're dead. I became even more social and traveled even more. I like going away to quiet places, just staying there. I was in Florence last month, in the country. There was a cook. There were occasional visitors, very few. I had endless, long days. It reminded me of childhood, being able to write and write for hours, then listen to music, read, go to sleep at three in the morning if I wanted to, and wake up at noon, which I haven't been able to do for years.

CMH: You've said your novels are "movie-proof."

EW: When I was younger and more arrogant and less interested in money, I made that statement. Now, I'd be thrilled to get the advance to help pay some of my debts. A movie that's good can lead more people to the book. We've seen that with Michael Ondaatje or Toni Morrison or even Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides*. Lots of books by friends of mine have really gone over the top in terms of sales. The book always exists, so there's no way the movie can really ruin it, except with a very young writer, if it's a first or second book and the movie's a bomb. That can turn people off. Scott Spencer wrote *Endless Love*, and that was made into a movie in the seventies. It was a bomb. It's taken a long time for that book to come up out of the ashes of the bad movie.

CMH: Can you crack open the myth for the men over forty who believe there is no life left for them? How is it they believe they can stop aging if they have enough sex, if they work out hard, daily, in the gym?

EW: Gay men are men, American men in this case. What's most important to men in general, whether gay or straight, as they get older, is career. With some career success, you can face aging; and if you don't have it, you can't. It's a feeling of self-realization, a feeling of power, making a difference, not just being interchangeable, or having failed. A lot of gays devote their twenties to coming out at the gym or dancing or cruising or picking up gay folkways so they feel they can belong to this new group. Nobody's brought up to be gay. You have to go through a rapid introductory course when maturing, very shattering, because it's destabilizing to change identity, like having your sex changed, where there is an awful lot of depression and a high rate of suicide, consuming so much psychic energy that gays can be a little slow in getting their careers launched.

Lots of straight men, by age thirty, have one or two kids, are married, have launched a business of their own, and are fairly far along in their lives, whereas gays seem to have as both an advantage and a curse this ability to prolong their adolescence almost indefinitely. Their careers are sometimes slow in getting off the ground. Plus, there's prejudice against gays, damaging to careers. Gays don't like group sports as much as individual sports, in the same way they don't like to work for big corporations. They like to work on their own, with less fear of being unmasked, rejected, or kept out. Many don't try for important jobs. I didn't mean to give a solemn answer, but I think men in general who do well in their careers can face aging as well as anybody can. Straight life is less tyrannical about age, for men, than gay life. Gay men not only have to be as successful as straight men: they have to be as beautiful as women, a double burden. Only success outweighs the loss of physical beauty. AIDS knocked out a generation of men, pioneers, the first people to say it's okay to be gay, and

thereby validating themselves. The next generation, the people who are now thirty-five, will come along and they won't take it lying down, this idea of being rejected because of age. The redefining begins with the desire to bed people your own age. I'm sixty. Guys my age say, "Oh, it's terrible the way those young people are rejecting us!" They would sooner die than go to bed with somebody sixty. Whereas I have always had affairs with men my own age and continue to do so. If you don't, how can you blame other people for not accepting old people?

CMH: The narrative of *The Married Man* is a peculiar one, nomad-driven. Will your character find a true home, will you?

EW: I'm living now in New York. The city feels like a businessman's hotel, very transient. In the sixties and seventies, Manhattanites swore by the city. Now people want to make a few contacts and get out. It's too expensive, soulless. The Village used to be the heart of Manhattan: now it's completely yuppie-fied, and also de-gayed, I might add. I mean, it's not gay anymore, the West Village.

CMH: Do you search for a home?

EW: No matter where I go, if I like the habitat, I start looking at real estate ads in the window. "Oh, this would be a nice place to live! Why not Edinburgh?" But I've tried to acquire a Buddhist side that sees location as transitory. I feel, if I really found a home, it would be an unfortunate illusion. I train myself for change, the medium we live in.

CMH: The nomad-driven narrative of *The Married Man* is not as character-driven as the books of the trilogy [*A Boy's Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, and *The Farewell Symphony*] were.

EW: I wanted to show a phenomenon, AIDS restlessness. I wanted to show the desire to cram into the remaining two or three years of your life as much experience as possible. Travel is soothing to people who are ill, if it's not too tiring and mildly challenging. You have to make that train, you have to pack your bags quickly, you have to get used to the new hotel room, you have to orient yourself and not get lost, make sure to get to the best museums within three days. That's mild distraction; that nomadism is characteristic of people with AIDS. In the Moroccan section of my book I wanted to deflect the emotions of the characters into the landscape. I wanted the landscape to take on intensity and sorrow. Poets are familiar with this strategy. James Merrill used to say that if a poet looks at anything long enough, it will reflect back to him his feelings. I feel that's the idea behind landscape poetry and what I was trying to do at the end of the book.

CMH: Your tragic characters, like Julien who suffers pain and indignity for so long, are imbued with beauty.

EW: Appetite for life gets communicated to the reader and it gets manifested in fiction, if it does, as an appetite for detail. When I'm depressed or when I'm feeling gloomy about life, I can't write. Why? Because nothing comes to mind. I can't make up any detail, to body forth a scene. But when I'm feeling good, I can hardly write fast enough to put it all down. Why? Because appetite for life returns as a passion for minutiae. That contradicts the idea of death. If death is linked in our minds with sleep, with the unconscious, with depression, with disengagement, then life is always this enthusiasm.

CMH: When writing, do you think about connecting the detail to the narrative?

EW: I'm aware of a balancing act, not wanting to go so far in the direction of description that I lose the thread of the narrative. A better metaphor might be a *bel canto* singer, adding ornamentation, description, and social commentary to the melody, but not to the point that the melody gets lost. In *bel canto* opera singers embellished their arias, especially if they would repeat the melody. The second time they were allowed to embellish it as much as they wanted to. But they couldn't let the musical line become so charged that the melody got completely lost. Nor could they throw the orchestra off by disobeying the basic rhythm of the piece. That's a metaphor for what I mean about submitting to the imperative of the narrative.

The Sensual Part of Beauty Is the Wound

Chris Freeman / 2003

From the *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 10.4 (Jul.–Aug. 2003): 10–12. Reprinted by permission.

Edmund White is the award-winning author of more than a dozen books, including the autobiographical trilogy *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, and *The Farewell Symphony*, as well as *The Joy of Gay Sex* (with Charles Silverstein), *States of Desire*, *Genet: A Biography*, *Proust*, *The Married Man*, and, most recently, *Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris*. His new novel, *Fanny: A Fiction*, will be published in the fall of 2003. White is director of creative writing at Princeton University and lives in New York City. He delivered a lecture on the historical novel as part of the Department of English's Esther Freier Endowed Lecture Series at the Twin Cities campus of the University of Minnesota in November 2002 and was kind enough during his visit to give me an interview, from which the following conversation—about the body, aging, and beauty—is excerpted.

Chris Freeman: Let's talk for a bit about aging. In Christopher Isherwood's wonderful novel *A Single Man*, the protagonist, George, is fifty-eight. I wonder whether that novel seems different to you now that you're sort of George's age than it did when you were reading it back when it first came out and you were around thirty.

Edmund White: Gay men get used to the idea of being old very quickly because, I mean—

CF: We get old so young!

EW: That's it. I mean, I think after thirty, you really are considered old by most of the people you want to go to bed with. I remember Virgil Thompson, the composer, once said to me, "Get used to the idea of being old because you'll spend more than half your life being that in the eyes of most people." So, I think I did get used to it very early on. On the other hand, I think I was very young-looking myself until I was about fifty and then—boom!—I suddenly looked my age. I mean, I sort of let myself go and I didn't care much, but also partly I think I let myself go when Hubert [Sorin, White's lover, who died of AIDS-related complications in 1994] died. But, the truth is, you can go on having a sex life. In fact, I go to bed with boys now who are cuter than the ones I could have had when I was thirty, but I think it's on different terms now. For instance, I never go to a bar because there's nothing there for me. Even boys who like older men would never be seen cruising an older man in front of their friends ...

CF: Or they would not be seen leaving a bar with one.

EW: That would be a disgrace. So, you have to meet them in a way that their friends don't know about.

CF: How?

EW: I've met guys through the Internet, though even there the question of age comes up right away. But there is someone who resembles Michelangelo's David whom I met on line at four AM on a rainy Tuesday in February—and I've been seeing him occasionally ever since. I've also been known to meet people who've written me fan letters; Michael Carroll, my lover for the last eight years, wrote me a wonderful long letter when I was still in Paris and he was living in the Czech Republic. Of course, the baths is the most honest place to meet someone strictly for sex. Everyone comes wrapped in a towel, nothing more, and there are no lengthy introductions.

CF: A scene in *A Single Man* has George looking at his reflection and seeing all of his selves—the younger man and the older. He's sort of trying to recognize himself in his older body or the different parts of his life.

EW: Yeah, definitely. I'm always shocked when I see photos of my younger self because it's not the way I think of myself. I think of myself as younger and slimmer and cuter. It's a strange kind of double vision, I suppose. Another thing that happens when you're my age is you think, "At the most I have twenty more years to live and probably only fifteen more years to work, and how many books can I write in that period?" And I think of how quickly the last fifteen years went by, so it seems to me really like being on a rapid slide. Everybody my age talks about how to avoid the horror of senility and a painful or disgraceful decline. I don't think there is a way, unless you commit suicide at just the right moment.

CF: Or you get taken in some accident or some other type of thing.

EW: You can long for that.

CF: Interesting. It must be strange for you, because of the last fifteen years of your life, now to be fifteen years later talking about having fifteen more years to live.

EW: Well yes, there's that, too. I mean, I was diagnosed HIV positive in 1985, so I certainly thought "This is it."

CF: How do you—how does anyone—get over the obsession with an HIVpositive body as an infected body? How do you get past that?

EW: I suppose you must begin by liking the body of someone else who has AIDS. I wrote a little piece called "The Photo." What happened was that Rollie McKenna, a friend of the poet James Merrill, was living down in Key West. One day we were over at her house—she was very, very old—and she took a picture of Hubert, who was quite ill. And I love this photo. It's right before he died, so he was hollow-faced and somehow scorched. I mean, his skin was so dark by that point. Anyway, Hubert's brother—who's a big, handsome, gay weightlifter—saw it and said, "Why on earth do you have that photo on your mantle?" And then I thought about it, and I wrote this piece, and it was all about how anybody can be banally handsome, and that Hubert had been very beautiful and very handsome, but so what?

There was this other kind of beauty that he had earned and won through the disease, that the disease had given him, and this was a superior form of beauty. Some of that, of course, was whistling in the dark, but it was also my determination not to succumb to the world's aesthetic. So much is coded, so much judgment and distaste is coded into all those words about health and sickness.

CF: Let's talk a bit more about one of our mutual favorite topics, beauty. You've written about beauty and about taste or your own taste in men or boys. There's been a lot of conversation in the gay community about the sculpted bodies and the Tom Bianchi versions of beauty, which Tom Bianchi doesn't really even buy into, as his essays make clear, perhaps most notably in 1995's *In Defense of Beauty*. He's written eloquently about other kinds of beauty, not just muscle boys.

EW: He never shows it, though.

CF: Maybe not. So, what is beauty to you?

EW: My definition of beauty is extremely wide. The people who think I'm a "looksist" are always shocked when I point out somebody on the street and say, "Oh, isn't he beautiful?" And they'll say, "That guy?" I mean, the truth is, I guess there's a constant interplay between my ideas of physical beauty and my ideas of what's attractive on a moral level and even just the simple level of animal energy. So, I'm really open to almost anybody and consider most people good looking.

Jean Genet, in an essay about the artist Giacometti, wrote about the wound and how we all have a wound. For me, the sensual part of beauty is the wound. If I look at a pornographic film, let's say, and I can't see any flaws—any kind of squirming nervousness in the eyes or any kind of anxiety about keeping an erection or any anxiety or uncertainty at all—then that person isn't beautiful to me. I mean, right now I'm writing about the photographer Greg Gorman's nudes, and I find it very hard to do because the people are too perfect. They look to me like androids rather than real people. So, I talk about that in my essay. The wound or the flaw is an important ingredient in beauty. It goes back to "Rappaccini's Daughter" and "The Birthmark" of Nathaniel Hawthorne. I think my main feeling in love and in sex is gratitude. I always feel very grateful to this person. I see other people as semi-divine beings who confer favors on me.

CF: Lucky you.

EW: Yeah, lucky me. I have been very, very lucky that way because, I mean, I wouldn't go to bed with me, but other people do. So, that's very nice.

CF: Is beauty dangerous? Let's talk about the person who has beauty.

EW: I've lived with a lot of famous beauties, and I know how fragile it is. It's something that they're never quite sure they have. But, on the other hand, they don't want to go out the door without spending two hours making sure it's there. It's not hypocritical; it's uncertainty about exactly what "it" is. They know that it has a date on it—that it's not going to go on forever.

CF: Right. An expiration date.

EW: Yes, a short shelf life. I oftentimes try to think, would I like this person so much if he weren't beautiful, and would I attribute to him all these wonderful qualities? What if he were sitting here, eighty-five years old and bald and covered with sores, would I think what he's saying is so intelligent and so endearing? But I guess I have almost a Platonic feeling that physical beauty is a sort of access to wisdom and goodness—that there is somehow a link.

I think we live in a very odd society where all advertising, movies, television, everything is geared to physical beauty and worships it slavishly. And yet, if you were to interview almost any American, he or she would

probably rank physical beauty very low on his or her list of important values. People think it's superficial to talk about beauty the way I am talking about it now. I can hardly find the terms to do it because they are so unfamiliar. You almost have to go back to Plato to find any vocabulary for discussing beauty. And yet, I'm really only articulating the principles everybody operates under but nobody admits. There's a discourse around beauty that has become both universal and erased.

CF: I think beauty is dangerous for the people who have it—in part because of the values of our culture—because if they live in that beauty, then they're considered arrogant, and people hate that and resent them for it. There's that slogan, "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful," which I think L'Oréal or one of the hair-care products uses. I love that line because, what better reason to hate someone or to be hated, right? I think I've watched beauty destroy so many people because they don't own their beauty. They don't know how to manage it.

EW: I also think that, because we equate youth and beauty, we have a very odd misunderstanding of beauty. For example, Virginia Woolf talks about Mrs. Ramsay's beauty in *To the Lighthouse*, and when she enters a room, everybody changes. We're talking about a fifty-five-year-old woman. I think few American kids, say, reading that book for a college course can even make sense of that, because they can't imagine somebody their mother's age being considered beautiful.

CF: I recently taught the movie *Antonia's Line*, the wonderful Dutch film, by Marleen Gorris, and my students were stunned to realize that the woman who plays Antonia is beautiful. And they sort of said this before they realized what that meant because she's this zaftig fifty-something-year-old woman and she's beautiful—the actress—but that's part of the reason why this is not an American movie. We spent a lot of time talking about the different ways in which it's not an American movie. I think the taboos about vanity and arrogance and those kinds of things make beauty almost as much a curse as a gift. I always like to talk to people who are beautiful about their beauty.

EW: Are they comfortable with that?

CF: They're not at all. They either don't want to admit that they're beautiful, or they don't want to admit what beauty does for them. It's like an affirmative action thing or something. They don't want to admit that it was because they were beautiful that a door was opened for them.

EW: And yet, take one form of beauty, height. There was a study I read two or three years ago that men over six feet tall tend to get top positions, move ahead in life faster, and so on. And I think you could probably correlate success with traits like blondness.

CF: There have been a number of studies done about school children and how teachers treat the good-looking ones better than the plain ones.

EW: There was another study I read about showing that a lot of recidivism in prison was due to or at least correlated with people being very badly scarred or hideously ugly. [See Richard L. Kurtzberg, et al., "Plastic Surgery on Offenders," in *Justice and Corrections*, Johnson and Savitz, eds., 1978.] This one head of a hospital decided to do plastic surgery on a group of these multiple offenders and then turned them back into the world, and many of them changed their

behavior drastically. Most of them didn't end up going back to prison.

I think it's such a huge subject, and it's really only the residue of a hateful Christianity that keeps people from seeing the pagan power and even divinity of beauty. Which isn't to say that I couldn't fall in love next with a total dweeb.

AIDS, Arts, and Responsibilities: An Interview with Edmund White

Mark Mascolini / 2005

From *IAPAC Monthly* 11.8 (August 2005): 234–40. Published by the International Association of Physicians in AIDS Care. Reprinted with permission from www.IAPAC.org. © IAPAC, 2005.

For gay men of a certain age—this reporter's age, for example—you could not live in New York in the 1970s and consider yourself cool without reading Edmund White's two novels. Nabokov raved. Sontag cheered. But for us *Forgetting Elena* and *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* meant more than high art by a heretofore unknown. They meant smart, deep, probative prose by an avowed homosexual who had no time for guilt, remorse, or maudlin maunderings toward self-awareness.

White went on to map the ins and outs of gay sex (in *The Joy of Gay Sex* with Charles Silverstein), to map the routes of gay travel (in *States of Desire*), and to snag a National Book Critics Circle Award for his landmark biography of gay lit's ur-rebel, Jean Genet. But White's four autobiographical novels—starting with the breakthrough *A Boy's Own Story*—define his legacy.

For many gay men White's nameless hero holds a flawless mirror to our lives, yet one that is sharper, subtler, droller than our own nonfictive bios. We follow that hero through the years of gay repression, gay rebellion, gay liberation, and inevitably AIDS. Like many gay men who thrived in the seventies, White picked up HIV himself and watched his friends die ugly deaths. Unlike most, he wrote about it beautifully from hard experience. He lost his best friend, a cherished editor, and his lover to AIDS.

Since White just finished his *real* autobiography, *My Lives*, it seemed a good time to ask him to reflect on AIDS, gays, prose, and prospects for gay culture in the age of HIV—and even to ask for some clinical pointers. Not that he has retired to the armchair of graybeard reflection. After he launches *My Lives*, White will continue work on a novel about Stephen Crane and fine-tune his play *Terre Haute* at the Sundance Theater Workshop.

The third novel in his tetralogy, *The Farewell Symphony*, takes its name from the Haydn opus in which the entire orchestra vacates the stage one by one, leaving only a lonely violin to carry the tune. The novel tapped it as a rueful image of an AIDS survivor—not unlike White. But one may also see Haydn's solitary concertmaster as the image of a dauntless artist, fiddling furiously.

IAPAC Monthly: You've written a great deal, and you don't seem to be slowing down. Would you have written with less urgency if you hadn't been infected by a deadly virus?

Edmund White: I found out I was positive in 1985, though I'm sure I was positive for five years at that point because most of my contemporaries were. My initial response was depression and not working. I just pulled the covers over my head for a year and didn't do anything.

I had a Swiss lover when I was living in Paris and we took the HIV test

together. I said to him, "I'm a good enough novelist to know what's going to happen—you're going to be negative, I'm going to be positive, and you're going to drop me." That's just what happened, although we're still good friends. But he was afraid of me.

So it was all very depressing and I didn't work well at all initially. Then I began to work on this mammoth project, the Genet biography, which took seven years. And I kept thinking, "This is the height of folly if I only have two years to live." But I didn't know then that I would be a slow progressor.

I'm not a nonprogressor. My T cells have drifted down over the last twenty years from seven hundred to six hundred to five hundred to four hundred. Pretty soon I guess I'll have to go on meds; my doctor wants me to go on now. But because some of the meds are hard on your heart and I have some heart problems, it's kind of a toss-up about what to do as long as I remain asymptomatic.

Only when I thought—"Gee, I guess I'm not going to die right away"—did I come out of my depression and begin to write at this feverish pitch. The first two novels I wrote after I learned I had HIV—*The Farewell Symphony* and *The Married Man*—and my book of short stories, *Skinned Alive*, all dealt with AIDS. And I did write them with some urgency, partly because I was living in France where, at that time, there wasn't much of an AIDS community.

I felt isolated there. In New York I'd been one of the founders of the Gay Men's Health Crisis [GMHC] and I'd known people involved in AIDS activism early on. But I left New York in 1983, so that was still early days. I was in on the early meetings of the French counterpart to Gay Men's Health Crisis, AIDES, because after Michel Foucault died in 1984, his lover Daniel Defert asked me to help him with the first meetings.

When I finally got around to writing those novels and the short stories, I did feel an urgency—but for my own sake, not for anybody else's—to communicate with people about what it was like to be positive and what it was like to live this way.

IAPAC Monthly: You confront AIDS head-on in *The Married Man*, but AIDS is more a shadow hanging over *The Farewell Symphony* until that last sad chapter. How do you decide how tightly to focus on AIDS in your fiction?

Edmund White: It's like trying to get a child to swallow cod liver oil. Nobody wants to read about AIDS. People who have it don't want to read about it because it's depressing. People who don't have it but are susceptible to HIV don't want to read about it because it's bad news. The only thing people want to read about AIDS is the headline that says they've found a cure. You can walk into bookstores and see piles of AIDS book remainders: Nobody wants to read them.

So anyone writing about HIV faces a commercial and technical problem. The commercial problem is that we have to sell enough copies to stay in business and get another contract to write another book. The technical problem is how to lure people into a novel that seems innocent and then get them to think about AIDS. For instance, *The Farewell Symphony* certainly announces from the title on that it's going to be a downer, but the epidemic doesn't arrive until late in the book.

After I'd written *A Boy's Own Story*, my original plan was to write two more stories—one about the sex-mad seventies, then one about AIDS. The trouble was I waited so long because of the Genet biography that when I finally got around to this I thought it would be intolerable to write a book about everyone having

fun and fucking each other, then a few years later to publish another book in which everybody dies of AIDS.

People wouldn't want to read *either* book. They'd see the first one as totally irresponsible and cuckoo and the second one as a total downer. So I thought I'd fuse them and write a much longer single volume than I'd intended, and that became *The Farewell Symphony*. I thought foreshadowing AIDS and talking about the good old days at the same time was a strategy that would make people read on.

IAPAC Monthly: I'm surprised there's that much premeditation in planning a novel.

Edmund White: I'm very reader oriented. The only kind of criticism I like is reader-response theory, developed by Wolfgang Iser. To me it's as though the writer is playing the piano and the piano is the reader. You're trying to get sounds out of it; you're trying to get responsiveness—to please and entertain him enough to keep him reading—then also to force him a little to deal with hard issues.

IAPAC Monthly: What other works of fiction, drama, or poetry do you esteem for the way they address the epidemic?

Edmund White: I like quite a few French books. For example, I am a big admirer of Hervé Guibert, as I explained in my essay "Sade in Jeans." What I like about Guibert is that he was tough. It seems to me that in the English-speaking world the problem in AIDS writing has been sentimentality—a tearful, victimized, medicalized approach to AIDS and not enough defiance, anger, gutsiness. I don't want to name names, but we've had everything from AIDS deathbed weddings to angels descending.

Of course this has been vastly admired by most people, and I feel like a cad not liking it. But I don't like its sentimentality. It's not that different from the death of Little Nell in Dickens. I think people living through AIDS probably get a lot of consolation from that kind of writing. But I think, as literature, it's dubious.

Among writers in English, I'm a big fan of Alan Hollinghurst. I feel he's dealt with AIDS extremely well. It's a real factor in his most recent book, *The Line of Beauty*, although it's not center stage. But again I think that's a good tactic for getting people to read. And I think that by taking that approach he was able to win the Man Booker Prize, which I don't think a straight AIDS novel could ever win.

In Hollinghurst's second book, *The Folding Star*, a character named Dawn is dying of AIDS. And it's all miraculously well written. I think he's one of the greatest writers alive.

IAPAC Monthly: Several years ago on my way to an HIV neurology meeting I picked up *The Man with Night Sweats*, a book of poems by Thom Gunn—quite by chance because I'd never heard of him. When I wrote about the meeting I quoted from Gunn's poem "Lament," which has a few lines that I thought might strike a chord with neurologists: "You tried to stay the man that you had been, / Treating each symptom as a mere mishap / Without import. But then the spinal tap." And a few neurologists who went to that meeting and read the article wrote to me, asking about Gunn and asking for a copy of the whole poem. Experiences like that make me wonder whether HIV doctors can *learn* from the AIDS literature. And that makes me wonder whether *people with AIDS*

learn from the AIDS literature.

Edmund White: I think people do—but not in great numbers. The first thing I ever wrote about AIDS was *The Darker Proof* with Adam Mars-Jones, an English writer who's been a friend of mine forever. We decided we'd do a paperback original of stories about AIDS that would come out quickly. And it did come out fairly early, in 1987, which was early for AIDS literature.

Our idea was that because it was paperback we could get it in print right away, and it would be cheap to buy. We felt that the only people talking about AIDS in the 1980s were doctors and that problems gays had faced for a hundred years were that they were a subject of medical enquiry and they were considered a medical category. The whole discourse had been medicalized.

One of the many tasks of gay liberation, starting with Stonewall in 1969, was to reverse that way of thinking and declassify homosexuality as a medical condition by the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association. We succeeded in those battles. But AIDS seemed to push everything backwards to an age when the only ones who were talking about male homosexuals were doctors who weren't gay or didn't identify as gays. They were discussing us in a very clinical way as though we were guinea pigs—"subjects."

Adam and I both felt it was important to show the inner life of people dealing with AIDS. Either they were caretakers or they had the disease themselves or were worrying about it. I don't think that book sold many copies but it caused quite a stir in England. I incorporated my stories into *Skinny Alive*.

But I don't think you have to write specifically about AIDS to foster deeper thinking about gay culture and our response to this disease. When Larry Kramer discovered I was writing the Genet biography in 1987, he flew into a rage in print, saying the only thing anyone who's gay should write about is AIDS—and how dare Edmund White (who's supposed to be a good writer) take on this ridiculous historical subject that's totally irrelevant to our concerns?

My feeling was that if we're in danger of being reduced to a single issue, AIDS, and if we're in danger of being seen mainly as victims of a fatal medical condition, then it's part of my AIDS work to write about a great cultural figure who stood outside of the whole AIDS discourse. I thought it was important to write about this towering literary figure to remind people of all these great cultural accomplishments achieved by gays that had nothing to do with AIDS—and to remind them that we'd get back to that.

IAPAC Monthly: Your essay on AIDS writing, "Journals of the Plague Years," ends with a series of questions about where HIV literature is headed now that people of means can take effective regimens. So let me read those questions, which you posed in 1997, and ask if you think any of them has been answered: "Will all those people who died be forgotten? Because lesbians and gays seldom hand their sexual identity down to their children, will what we are suffering be lost? Will we continue our fight to help the poor suffering from AIDS here and abroad? Or will we succumb to instant amnesia, pop an Ecstasy and return to the dance floor?"

Edmund White: Pretty good questions, huh? Oh, God. What do you think?

IAPAC Monthly: You worked as a journalist—you know the interviewer never answers questions.

Edmund White: Oh, right. I think the truth is that even for people who can

afford the drugs, there are still a lot of inconveniences in taking them. Everybody knows someone who's just had some implant in his face because of wasting or the guy upstairs who's dealing with a hump on his back. For such a body-oriented culture, it's very dismaying.

I always felt that the next generation of ads warning people against unsafe sex should concentrate on those things. What people learned about the antismoking campaign is that if you mentioned death, people didn't read on, because a little curtain comes down to protect them from the idea of death. You needed to mention things like smelly breath, hacking cough, burning holes in your clothes and sofa—those were things people could register and react to. But death, no.

By the same token good anti-AIDS advertisements now should emphasize things like lipodystrophy—not death.

IAPAC Monthly: The narrator of your autobiographical novels battles a dialectic familiar to many gay men—hedonistic adventure versus “true love”—meaning monogamous love. At least that was true of many gay men I knew when I was young, but I wonder if young gay men feel that way today.

Edmund White: I think they definitely do. At least the official rhetoric is that they should get a partner, and they oftentimes do, perhaps planning to be faithful as a way to avoid HIV. If they're both tested and both negative, they can have “unsafe sex” together. But that puts tremendous pressure on them to be honest, and they can't always live up to that. Then the consequences can be fatal.

My own feeling is that it's better to go into a back room and have safe sex with twenty unknown people than to have unsafe sex with your lover—because you can't *really* believe what he says.

I know of one highly successful gay scholar who “married” his lover in a formal ceremony. Though they pledged eternal fidelity to each other, neither of them was faithful. But they could never bring themselves to admit they weren't faithful. So one of them picked up HIV and transmitted it to the other. They both died. But they never admitted they had AIDS because that would have blown their cover as this ideal faithful couple.

I think there are an awful lot of young people who have a lover but are also cruising on the Internet. I cruise on the Internet and it's just *clogged* with thousands and thousands of people. There's an extraordinary amount of activity of every variety.

IAPAC Monthly: Do young gays ask you questions about sexuality?

Edmund White: No, they don't. Most young people don't even know who I am because they don't read me. If you look in *Gaydar* or other places where people are asked to list their favorite author, it's never me. (It's always David Sedaris.) Maybe my work is too sad, or too unpleasant, or too literate. But when I was young I didn't ask anyone questions about sex either.

IAPAC Monthly: In an essay on the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, you wrote that “art and passion are the two supremely irresponsible modes of experience.” Do you regard your autobiographical novels—which span gay repression, liberation, and AIDS—as either responsible or irresponsible?

Edmund White: I think they're more responsible than not. Even though I was criticized for “glamorizing” sexual promiscuity in *The Farewell Symphony*, my own feeling is—wait a minute: everyone dies in the book. So it's not denying or

ignoring the consequences of unsafe sex. But I also am a romantic, and people who think sex is worth dying for—or that art is worth dying for—have all my sympathy. I understand what they're talking about.

There's been a weird natural selection whereby the people with my beliefs tend to have died. And the people who are kind of cautious and prudish and pleasure-phobic are the ones who survived, so you hear a lot from them. They preach to everybody and give a lot of lessons.

I feel there's always been a strong moral strain in my writing. The single best essay about me appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* and was written by a straight English critic who compared me to [Ralph Waldo] Emerson. I loved that because I feel, first of all, that I am a great American writer and, secondly, that I have that moral preoccupation that somebody like Emerson had.

Yes, I'm very pro-pleasure, but I don't think that makes me irresponsible.

IAPAC Monthly: Through *The Joy of Gay Sex*, *States of Desire*, your novels, your essays, you've defined gay culture and behavior for lots of gay men. You did for me. Do you see yourself as a definer—or would you prefer some other word to describe your legacy?

Edmund White: "Definer" is fine. I hope it's true. I mean it's a very optimistic view of my work.

One thing that people forget when they frame categories like that is that the person himself probably wasn't aspiring toward any such thing. There may be a tendency to say, "White set himself up as an authority on gay culture, and look at all the mistakes he made—A, B, and C." But the truth lies somewhere else. J. D. Salinger probably thinks he's a fairly minor writer, yet he was crowned, then dethroned.

We do that a lot in this country. Even in a minor way with a writer like me there's a tendency to set someone up as an authority, which he himself never claimed to be. Or if he puts himself in the running, he's very happy if lots of other people have their own ideas and publish them.

I think at a certain moment I was sort of prominent, and some people tend to imagine that I set myself up as an authority. For instance, people blame me for encouraging gay people to have sex in *The Joy of Gay Sex*, but that was written in 1976. When AIDS struck, Charles Silverstein and I tried to withdraw the book instantly, but the publisher wouldn't listen to us. Finally we were able to publish a revised AIDS-conscious version. It took too long, but that wasn't our fault.

Anything that touches on gay sexuality is very fraught now because of AIDS. People tend to be ahistorical in thinking of past books as being somehow guilty of promoting something that happened five years later.

IAPAC Monthly: You turned up at some of the watershed events in recent gay history—the Stonewall riot, the founding of the Violet Quill and GMHC—and you wrote the archetypal coming-out novel. I won't ask about the worst memories these events left, but what was the best?

Edmund White: The odd thing is that I've never seen myself as a team member in gay life. I feel that I never repeated anything. I would go to Fire Island in the sixties and seventies, then I stopped going. I would go to back rooms and baths, but then I'd stop it. In other words I feel that I've never been one to acquire habits or persist in something very much. In my writing I feel that I've tried to avoid doing the same book over and over. My most recent book, *Fanny*, was a

straight historical novel. So I don't want to present myself as someone who identified with the gay movement and was there to crow over its triumphs, because I don't think I did that much.

Stonewall I sort of stumbled into. I was walking with a friend past the Stonewall at the time it was raided. We got involved and very excited by the demonstration. But it wasn't as though we were in the bar when the police raided it.

I don't think any of us took Violet Quill very seriously. We met only eight times. It was mainly about who could prepare the best dessert. But it's remembered because people like movements and because historians like to write about movements more than they like to write about individuals—and because it did actually coincide with a triumph of gay culture.

Somebody should write a book about the seventies in New York—straight and gay—but it would turn out to be mainly a gay story. I feel that was one of the high points in human culture. There were all these great people—Jasper Johns in painting, John Ashbery in poetry, [George] Balanchine's last years in ballet, many great novelists—there was a tremendous amount of activity and a New York aesthetic that was very powerful.

IAPAC Monthly: Lots of HIV clinicians read this journal. Do you have anything to say to them?

Edmund White: I would say don't have too rigid a notion of who the at-risk groups are. As I've gotten older and moved out of the prime gay category to resemble more the family dentist, I've found that I have sex with all kinds of people who wouldn't want to have sex with "a gay man." I have a tremendous repertoire of people in my address book who are married, bisexual, discreet, in their fifties, sixties, twenties, thirties, who have a dread of the gay culture.

I always practice safe sex, but what if I didn't? I could have infected a whole bunch of people by now. Because they don't think of me as being gay or likely to have HIV infection, they're comfortable having sex with me.

So on the basis of my own experience I believe there's a tremendous underground of people having gay sex—often unprotected sex—whom a clinician would never identify as being gay. Maybe it would be useful for more clinicians to be a little more alert to how fluid and open human sexuality is.

Line of Beauty: Laurie Taylor Interviews Edmund White

Laurie Taylor / 2005

From *New Humanist* 120.6 (November/December 2005): 14–16. Reprinted by permission.

There's been an uneasy consensus among reviewers of Edmund White's new autobiographical memoir, *My Lives*. Most have found its sexual explicitness difficult to take but have in the end felt compelled to acknowledge and often admire the extreme honesty of a subtle and knowing writer, who, in Gilbert Adair's words, has chosen to spend so much of his adult life in "slavishly obsessive thrall to the male sexual organ."

My Lives is not all sex. White finds time to tell us a great deal about his claustrophobic parents, his eccentric psychiatrists, his long sojourn in France, and his famous friends. But when I was preparing to interview him, I knew that at some point I was going to have to confront a range of extreme sexual behavior that I found not only alien to my straight viewpoint but also difficult to reconcile with a humanist stance.

Explicit sex is nothing new in White's writing. We seemed to have learned everything we might want to know about his sex life from his autobiographical tetralogy: *A Boy's Own Story* (1982), *The Beautiful Room is Empty* (1988), *The Farewell Symphony* (1997), and *The Married Man* (2000). With all that confessional background this latest venture struck one as rather like Proust turning up at the end of his life and announcing that he was now going to tell us how he really got on with his mother.

White affably disagreed with my analogy. "Well, I wrote a little book about Proust in which I noticed how much he had really invented. He would sometimes write letters to friends and ask if they had read his autobiography, meaning his novel, but that was complete rubbish because he invented everything. His work was based loosely on his life. But not in any very exact way. And my own autobiographical fiction is also quite far from my actual experience. For instance in *A Boy's Own Story*, if I had made the boy as eccentric as I really was then nobody would have been able to identify with him. I was really quite precocious, both sexually and intellectually, so I sort of dumbed down the boy in the story and tried to make him a little more innocent than I was."

But didn't this turn away from fiction create a further problem? Most writers who wanted to be biographically explicit employed fiction because it provided them with the perfect get-out. It's only a story, stupid. But he now had no such alibi. All the names and the facts were on parade. It was a degree of explicitness which had led one reviewer to complain: "Although Edmund White is HIV positive, the riskiest thing about going to bed with him is that your most intimate details—your dimensions, your distinctions and your defects—will sooner or later be writ large for all to see." Wasn't that a high price to pay?

"Maybe I have been unwise to unveil so much. But I did feel that people's lives are made up of such disparate elements that you almost never see thrown

together in fiction or in autobiography. I know so many New Yorkers who will go directly from the opera in their black tie to some sordid partouse. It seems to me that so many people's lives are made up of so many funny different elements and I wanted to put them together. To juxtapose those elements which you seldom find rubbing shoulders."

But didn't that make his revelations sound far too innocuous? *My Lives* was less a comedy of manners, a compendium of sexual hypocrisies, than an anatomy lesson in the outer bounds of gay sexuality. I read an extract that I had underlined. "The basement level was dank and narrow and smelled of cat piss. T ordered me to kneel on all fours facing the wall. When I heard him rooting around looking for a rubber and lubricant I glanced back over my shoulder. Furious, he sprang forward and beat my ass with my belt: 'I told you to fuckin' stare at the wall, shithead.' A minute later he'd unrolled the rubber and was slamming his way inside me."

Wasn't there a danger that such frankness might even alienate some of his gay admirers? Did they want to know about a life that might be so much more sex-obsessed than their own?

"Well, I was writing about myself. What else can I do? I can't pretend. Anyway, what is too much sex? Somebody once said that someone who is having too much sex is someone who is having more sex than you are. That is so relevant. I once figured out that I had had about three thousand partners."

I was not about to question his figures. I'd done quite enough background reading on White and the gay movement in America to know that promiscuity on this industrial scale could be regarded as evidence of a thoroughgoing subscription to gay ideology. It was, as John Banville, the Irish novelist, pointed out in a recent review of White's work, a revelation that was brought about by the arrival of the AIDS epidemic: "Before that we did not know, or averted our minds from the knowledge, that in the course of their active lives a large number of gay men will have thousands of sexual encounters, many of them anonymous and, it must also be assumed, loveless, though not, it must also be assumed, joyless." What the straight world also had to learn, Banville went on, was that in the gay world "having as much sex, as often as possible, with as many partners as one can accommodate, represented for the gays of the 1970s what White's narrator in *The Farewell Symphony* describes as a 'noble experiment.' It was a belief which, in the words of sociologist, Alan Sinfield, depended on the argument that since sex is what the system had tried to stop gays doing, then 'the more sex we have the more we assert our gayness.' White, himself, has announced on more than one occasion that sex is 'worth dying for.'"

It is a difficult position to defend but White is consistently unrepentant. "Even though I was criticized for 'glamorizing' sexual promiscuity in *The Farewell Symphony*, my own feeling is—wait a minute: everyone dies in the book. So it's not denying or ignoring the consequences of unsafe sex."

White speaks with authority on AIDS. He found out that he was HIV positive in 1985 and had to watch his friends and lovers die sad ugly deaths. When he learned about his own condition he "pulled the covers over [his] head for a year and didn't do anything," but later he learned that he was a "slow progressor" and might still have many years to live.

Hadn't his lucky escape made him just a little more cautious, a little more sympathetic to those gays who now stressed the safety of coupledness, the security of marriage?

"There's been a weird natural selection whereby the people with my beliefs tend to have died. And the people who are cautious and prudish and pleasure-phobic are the ones who survived, so you hear a lot from them. They preach to everybody and give a lot of lessons.... I'm very pro-pleasure but I don't think that makes me irresponsible."

He certainly doesn't want to be shunted into coupledness. He's not even certain that coupledness is safer than the promiscuous life he likes to lead. "My own feeling is that it's better to go into a back room and have safe sex with twenty unknown people than have unsafe sex with your lover—because you can't really believe what he says."

Neither is White's insistence upon the distinctiveness of gay love and promiscuity merely a behavioral advocacy. He believes that by writing so honestly about the nature of such sexuality he is reviving fiction. "I was so thrilled when I read in a book called *U and I* by Nicholson Baker (the American novelist and critic) that he felt heterosexual novelists were now being outstripped by gay novels in terms of frankness and in terms of examining the perverse aspects of love. All the arbitrary aspects of the gender role. I really do think the romantic and the social novel have got a shot in the arm from a new approach."

I suggested to him that one of the most original aspects of human relationships which "gay novels" such as his own highlighted was the distinction between friends and lovers. To a straight reader like myself, this was almost the most uncomfortable aspect of his fiction. Why did lovers and friends have to be so dichotomized? "Well, sometimes friends can become lovers. If you have a real friend you just wish good things for him and you want to do everything that will make him happy. And I don't think you have that attitude towards a lover. You would say to a friend, 'Look, if you are interested in him then go ahead and do it,' but would you do that with a lover?"

But wasn't there something anti-humanistic about the manner in which so many of the sexual encounters in his novels and his life depended on the depersonalization of the lover. We are given intimate details about the texture of his skin, the lustre of his hair, the shape of his cock, but nowhere are we allowed to know anything about the person. Lovers, in White's world, are truly sex objects.

"Well, I think there is esteem love, where you really esteem the other person and it's very close to friendship. But there is also passion which is depersonalized. Did Tristram really care about Isolde's hobbies and childhood? When Phaedra falls in love with her stepson is she really hoping that he will do well in school next semester? Love is a terrible urgent burning destructive force."

Did this mean that straight people were merely fooling themselves with the notion that love and friendship could be congruent? Were they engaged in a rationalization that his gay writing would help to dispel?

"It's not gay/straight. It's about men and women. The thing about gay male life is that it is men on men. It's male culture which is untrammelled or unresponsive to female culture. I remember reading a study of various kinds of couples in their mid-thirties. It seemed that lesbian couples had sex once a week. The male gay couples had it three times a day. And the heterosexuals twice a week. So, you can see heterosexuality as a kind of compromise between female desires and male desires. But when you have two men together they are much more direct about desire, much more spontaneous about it."

There's no time for friendship amongst all that desire? "I wouldn't want to exclude friendship from gay male life or even gay male love. What often happens when passion dies away is that friendship is left. What is really remarkable about gay male life is that gay male lovers usually remain friends. I can't say that about heterosexual couples after they break up."

But even if one accepted that such insights as these might add some variation and extra subtlety to the average novel about relationships, did this mean that one wanted to champion a gay genre of fiction? Wasn't the acceptance of the gay label a way of circumscribing one's sexual behavior that the true seeker of sexual pleasure would find constricting? He must surely have heard this sort of argument from his discussions with his one-time friend, Michel Foucault?

"Well, he wasn't very good value as an intellectual companion because he didn't like to talk about ideas. The first time I ever had dinner with him was in New York and I thought 'what am I going to say to him?' I eventually said, 'How did you get to be so smart?,' and he said, 'You know, I wasn't always so smart. I was a very bad student and then one day I fell in love with this boy who was even dumber than I was and I thought I could ingratiate myself with him if I did his homework. So I began to study so I could do his homework and that gave me a taste for it. I was madly in love with him. And then forty years later I was on a train going back to Paris and there was another old classmate of mine who started talking about school. I didn't mention my boy's name because I thought even at age fifty that I would blush. But I finally asked, "What ever happened to Jean Pierre?" And he said, "That old fag?" "Why do you call him that?" "Oh well, we all had him. Didn't you?"

A good story. But what about my question? Did the great French philosopher approve of White's decision to describe his writing as 'gay fiction'? White smiled. "Well, I think he thought that gay photography or gay painting was nonsensical but gay fiction was at least interesting because it showed people working out how to live in gay relationships. It was an ongoing project because nobody quite knew how to do it. He didn't mind people referring to homosexual acts but he didn't like the fact that they would say that they themselves were gay. He felt that we had inherited one bad thing from Christianity and that was the culture of avowal, the confession. You confess your secret on Jerry Springer and then you are defined for all time. I think he found that very trivializing and essentializing."

"But aren't you guilty of just that essentializing in many of your books? Aren't you forever insisting there are such 'things' as gay people and gay sexuality?"

"I recognize that. I have a chapter in *My Lives* called 'My Women' where I talk about all my early experiences with women and how I think if I was actually born in a more benign age, let's say a late one which had been more influenced by Foucault's declassification of sexual orientation, then maybe I would have been bisexual rather than exclusively one thing or the other."

We'd stayed off the subject of age until this point, even though White's descriptions of himself in *My Lives* as fat and old and increasingly pathetic are terrifying examples of the frontiers which this exercise in self-exposure chooses to cross.

I asked him if he hadn't brought such self-disgust upon himself because of his own obsession with physical beauty and particularly with the romantic argument that physical beauty was always a promise of real beauty, beauty

with a capital “B,” an argument that his detractors had crudely labeled “lookism”?

“Well, at the time I wrote that I had just had my heart broken by a young lover, a karate champion who was and is quite beautiful. And I guess I was a little bit melancholy, but I have come out of that and I have met a few people. I still feel in the swim. It seems like people are infinitely varied and you can always find someone who wants what you have to offer. I mean it is awfully hard to grow old, not just because you are losing your looks, but because you are bored with yourself, bored with your life, with how predictable others are, because you know in another ten or fifteen years you will be dead. As my mother said, ‘Nobody gets out of this thing alive.’”

White lives by that sentiment. He is firmly in the present and wants to tell the world that this is the main lesson of the AIDS epidemic. “I keep asking: why did I, who’d already lived a wonderfully full life and accomplished so much of what I’d set out to do, gain a stay of execution, whereas Hubert, my lover, who was just starting out in life had to die at thirty-three?”

“If I were a believer, perhaps I’d have some answers. As an atheist, I can’t even imagine that I was spared so that I wouldn’t die a fool or a sinner. An atheist lives in the present, since there will be no eternity. Perhaps that’s why I was given so much of the present to work with, since it’s all I’ll be getting.”

One last fascinating footnote. Although I didn’t know it at the time of my interview, White’s new book has not yet been released in his native America. Apparently the publishers wanted to find out how its explicitness went down in the UK before risking their reputation in the States. As I can personally confirm, at the grand age of sixty-five, Edmund White is still frightening the liberals.

Edmund White: *Hotel de Dream*

Michael Leonard / 2007

From *Curled Up with a Good Book*, 2007, <http://www.curledup.com/intwhite.htm>.
Reprinted by permission.

Michael Leonard interviewed author Edmund White about his novel, *Hotel de Dream*, gay life in 1890s New York, and art as a struggle against oblivion.

Michael Leonard: How did *Hotel de Dream* originally come about, and what ultimately drew you to write so passionately about the life of Stephen Crane?

Edmund White: I read in John Berryman's biography of Crane years ago the anecdote that Crane had started a book about a boy prostitute and abandoned it under pressure from his friend Hamlin Garland. I've since come to be skeptical about almost every aspect of the anecdote (which has but one—unreliable—source), but at the time it seemed to me so extraordinary that Crane, a proto-Hemingway author best known for his evocation of war, might have written sympathetically about homosexuality in the 1890s. I never forgot that possibility which, had it been realized, would have opened up another dimension to American fiction.

ML: At the core of the novel is this story that Crane may have written called "Flowers of Asphalt," about a boy prostitute, but unfortunately no trace of it remains. Would you like to tell us a bit about the possible existence of this story and how you ultimately turned it into *The Painted Boy*?

EW: James Huneker, Crane's friend, relates that he and Crane one night were accosted by a boy who initially they thought was begging but who later they realized was wearing mascara and was soliciting. According to Huneker, Crane was initially sickened by the idea of homosexuality but that soon enough he grew interested in the boy's story. He fed him and quizzed him and eventually borrowed money to pay for medical treatment for the boy. This anecdote I expanded into an entire novella. Not one paragraph of Crane's text remains, if it ever existed (Huneker claims that Crane wrote forty pages of it).

ML: What research did you do and what kinds of sources did you mine to bring Crane's world, and also the world of late nineteenth-century Manhattan to life for us? What were some of the challenges in recreating this world?

EW: Anything to do with gay life in the nineteenth century is pretty obscure and has only recently been emerging. I was influenced by Jonathan Ned Katz's *Love Stories: Sex between Men before Homosexuality* and by George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World*.

ML: Was the character of Elliott based on a real person?

EW: Huneker again claimed that his name was Coolan and that he had large violet eyes.

ML: The novel is filled with color and life, and obviously the portrayal of New York's gay world is central to the novel. Can you tell us what it might have been

like for gay men then, and particularly for boys like Elliott to survive in such a world?

EW: Half the population of Manhattan lived in tenements, which meant eight to a room without running water, hygiene, heating, or fresh air—perfect breeding grounds for tuberculosis. Gays themselves seemed highly uncertain about how to view themselves. Were they women in disguise? The “Third Sex”? Androgynes? Inverts? Freud’s ideas had yet to emerge (not that they were much of an improvement). In *Hotel de Dream* most of the gays are drag queens who usually work also as prostitutes. Their customers were not particularly stigmatized. The active partner was called “just a man” or a “jam.” I set a scene in the first gay bar, the Slide, which still exists as a (nongay) bar called Kenny’s Castaways on Bleecker Street.

ML: You describe how James “flutters away like an English Matron” and Wilde being a “mildewed chump.” Even Crane’s own boy whore book is labeled an “abomination.” Taking this into consideration, how did the specter of Oscar Wilde’s trial and conviction affect the attitudes of the characters in the novel and also the social attitudes of the time?

EW: I think that most educated people did consider Wilde to be an abomination. Certainly the details of his encounters with boy prostitutes in London and his “corruption” of Lord Alfred Douglas did seem shocking to the public (and would probably not go down very well now in our period, obsessed with the specter of pedophilia). There were some English intellectuals, however, mostly women, who pitied Wilde and realized how hypocritical Wilde’s former friends were being to disown him so thoroughly.

Crane made only one remark against Wilde (and none for him that were recorded), but I went with that in my book, just as I had him coming out against the thoroughly heterosexual Robert Louis Stevenson, whom he so closely resembled.

ML: Crane’s own fascination with the downtrodden seems to give him the necessary inspiration to go ahead with his story. When he first meets Elliott, he’s fascinated, but how do you think Crane would have reacted to a boy like Elliott and all of the other “kohl eyed fairy boys” and “brownie queens”?

EW: I think the fact that Crane was brought up in a sheltered world by a Methodist minister and a mother who was a temperance worker ensured that he had no preconceived ideas about homosexuality. When he encountered it for the first time as an adult he was no doubt shocked, but he was a reporter who loved low life (that was his beat). The fact that he was physically tiny and ill might have made him more vulnerable to other examples of suffering humanity (Crane died of TB at age twenty-eight).

ML: Cora wants Stephen to finish *The O’Ruddy* so they can pay off their debts, but she goes along with his plan to write *The Painted Boy* anyway. Why do you think she approaches his wishes with such a pragmatic and no-nonsense attitude?

EW: I think she loved him and knew that he loved her. Initially her love for him was inspired by her esteem for him as a writer (she too had literary ambitions). She was a prostitute and kept a brothel in Jacksonville, Florida, called Hotel de Dream where she first encountered Crane as a customer—and as a literary luminary.

ML: What do you think lies at the core of Cora and Stephen's marriage? What do you think they love about each other?

EW: I think that Crane had a true bohemian horror of respectability, which predisposed him to Cora. He had already come into conflict with the New York police department for defending other prostitutes—and the animosity of the cops made it impossible for Crane to work in New York after that as a journalist. I think he responded to Cora's basic generosity of soul.

Everything I've read about her makes me like her. He probably felt a bit scared of her reckless spending habits and her insatiable appetite for guests and visitors—and indeed there is a brief two-month period when he disappeared in Havana and did not respond to her supplicating letters. But in the end he chose her and she chose him and was buried later as "Cora Crane" though they were never properly married.

ML: You describe Stephen and Elliott as "fearless in battle" and "weary of life." One is riddled with tuberculosis, the other with syphilis. Keeping this in mind, are Elliott and Stephen in fact a mirror image of each other, perhaps even two sides of the same coin?

EW: I see Elliott as Crane's "genius," something like the life force, the spiritual side, and the boy within him—certainly his muse.

ML: How do you think Elliott's syphilis has affected his circumstances in New York? What were you trying to show here? Is his condition perhaps a metaphor for the AIDS crisis?

EW: Theodore Koch, the older man in love with Elliott, believes that he, too, has been infected with syphilis and that the two of them will eventually suffer from the tertiary forms of syphilis, tabbies (withering away of the inner organs) or dementia. Yes, both syphilis and tuberculosis were something like precursors to AIDS in the late twentieth century.

ML: Love and loyalty—or lack thereof—are themes that weave throughout. There's Cora's palpable love for Stephen, and also Theodore's obsessive love and sexual attraction for Elliott. What part do you think love plays in the characters' interactions with each other?

EW: There is "esteem love" (so dear to Corneille) between Theodore and Christine and Theodore and his children, and "passion love" between Theodore and Elliott. Cora and Crane have a higher form of love, which combines both passion and esteem.

ML: Death and decay also seem to echo throughout, especially in regard to Crane's debilitating illness and also Elliott's gradual decline from syphilis. But there's also the need to defend Elliott's youth and beauty. In this respect, what do you think is the significance of Theodore's insistence in having Elliott's features preserved in the marble boy?

EW: I suppose a work of art—even a bad one like Piccirilli's statue of Elliott—is always a struggle against oblivion, even as my novel could be counted as just such a rocket to escape the gravitational pull of time. Of course I was very influenced as a boy by Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* and other Hawthorne tales such as "Rappaccini's Daughter." The actual way of fabricating the statue was inspired by a visit I made years ago to Canova's studio in Italy.

ML: Sex and illness and death are themes that, over the years, have

reverberated throughout much of your work. Keeping this in mind, what are you saying about the human condition?

EW: Even though I coauthored the original *Joy of Gay Sex*, I always thought I'd be better suited to write *The Tragedy of Sex and Love*. I have a view of passionate love worthy of Racine, one of my literary forebears.

ML: *Hotel de Dream* is multifaceted and structurally complex: Stephen and Cora's sorrowful final journey from Sussex to Bavaria, Stephen's memories of meeting Elliott in the queer underworld of 1890s New York; and the actual story "The Painted Boy," that painfully recounts Theodore's affair with Elliott, which Stephen urgently narrates to Cora. Was it a challenge to bring all of these elements together?

EW: You would think so, but I wrote it straight through in an e-draft in a period of nine months of research and writing. To those readers who like the book, I might whisper that I felt inspired writing it.

ML: Which character do you think undergoes the most profound change in the novel?

EW: I suppose Theodore, who starts out a banker nearly comatose with respectability and ends as a martyr skinned alive by passion.

ML: How do you think Stephen Crane (and also Elliott and Theodore for that matter) would react to modern twenty-first-century gay life if they were alive today?

EW: I'm afraid modern gay life is so debased that it doesn't offer much to anyone, not even to us who invented it.

ML: You've been writing now since the early 1970s, and have amassed such a huge body of work. Which novel most resounds with you? And do you have any advice for would-be writers who are just starting out?

EW: Like a parent I like all my children, though the novels slightly more than the nonfiction, which seems more ephemeral (with the exception of my autobiography, *My Lives*).

ML: Which authors have most influenced your work over the years?

EW: Christopher Isherwood and Vladimir Nabokov.

ML: And finally, are you working on a new project at the moment? If so, would you like to tell us a little bit about it?

EW: I'm writing a short biography of the nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud, half of a famous male-male couple—his other half was Paul Verlaine, an older poet.

Poetry as a “Disordering of the Senses”

Michael Ehrhardt / 2009

From the *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 16.1 (Jan.–Feb. 2009): 29–31. Reprinted by permission.

Back in 1953, noted scholar Wallace Fowlie observed of Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891) that “Editions of his work multiply each year. More than 500 books about him have been written in all languages.” In the intervening years, books on the visionary teenage poet have continued to arrive. There was also a film version of Rimbaud’s affair with Verlaine, *Total Eclipse*, based on Christopher Hampton’s play and starring a *pre-Titanic* Leonardo DiCaprio. In a smartly concise new biography, Edmund White takes on the legendary French poet, traveling the familiar byways of earlier investigations but with a queer perspective. He also offers his own astute translations of Rimbaud’s iconic poems.

White’s compact biography manages to deal handily with his famously elusive subject by sticking closely to the documented facts while adding “some of my odd hunches about Rimbaud.” Unlike White’s previous bios of the indisputably queer Jean Genet and Marcel Proust, Rimbaud’s sexual proclivities present a more complex state of affairs. Observes White: “For those modern readers who like to think that sexual orientation is straight or gay and always neatly categorized, Rimbaud is worrisomely hard to classify.” All the available evidence indicates that Rimbaud was as experimental in sex as he was in his art. His famous statement, “Je est un autre” (“I is another”), attests to his disgust with received bourgeois values. Raised as a Catholic, he longed to revert to paganism and “reinvent love.” On the cusp of puberty, he wrote in “At the Cabaret-Vert” about a servant girl “with large tits and lively eyes ... not one to be afraid of a kiss!” In a later prose poem called “Antique,” he’s intrigued by the androgynous “Graceful son of Pan! ... Your fangs glisten. Your chest is like a lyre and tinklings move up and down your white arms. Your heart beats in that abdomen where slumbers your double sex.”

Inevitably, a major focal point of any biography of Rimbaud is his scandalous relationship with Paul Verlaine, the married and respected member of the Parnassian poets. After the sixteen-year-old Rimbaud arrived in Paris at Verlaine’s invitation, the two entered into an artistic and sexual relationship based on the younger poet’s radical theory of the reinvention of language through the systematic “disordering of all the senses.” A decade older than Rimbaud, Verlaine was immediately smitten with the handsome and precocious—if boorish and lice-ridden—escapee from provincial Charleville, a situation that the younger poet milked with impunity.

One of White’s main projects is to explode a key thesis of Enid Starkie’s 1968 biography, *Arthur Rimbaud*, namely that the androgynous Rimbaud was gang-raped by drunken soldiers from the Paris Commune of 1871, a conclusion she based partly on his poem “The Stolen Heart.” Starkie argued that this was the “turning point in his development [and] ... the source of much of his later maladjustment and distress.” White dismisses this claim as Freudian claptrap

and points out the implausibility of soldiers in a city full of prostitutes and willing sex partners bothering to rape a fellow Commune, much less do so in front of one another.

In time, the intentionally boorish and arrogant Rimbaud was ostracized by the reigning artistic community, the Parnassians, and prevailed upon Verlaine, who felt that Rimbaud held the key to the ineffable, to leave the sterile security of his bourgeois married home life and join him on the open road as two absinthe-guzzling fellow vagabonds. Verlaine was the classic mean drunk, who could write elegant, impressionistic verse when sober but turn homicidal under the influence. As things turned out, the two poets—Rimbaud, the Dionysian pagan-provocateur, and Verlaine, the passive-aggressive, guilt-ridden lapsed Catholic—became as notorious as did Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell in a later day.

The climax to their toxic relationship occurred in Brussels when Verlaine, in a jealous rage, shot and wounded his lover and was arrested for attempted murder. Investigators uncovered a piece of “incriminating” doggerel by Verlaine addressed to Rimbaud:

What hard angel stuffs me full
Between the shoulders, while
I fly off to Paradise ...
O you, the Jealous one, who waves to me,
Here I am, here is all of me!
Still unworthy I crawl toward you—
Mount my loins and trample me!

Next, Verlaine was subjected to a dehumanizing medical examination, and the doctors reported on his “small penis and its particularly small, tapering head.” After a bogus rectal exam, they concluded that “P. Verlaine bears on his person traces of habitual pederasty, both active and passive.” He was convicted of sodomy and served a two-year prison sentence. Despite the “disgusting prurience” of the day’s pseudoscience, White notes that “as a result of it, curiously enough, we know more about the intimate condition of (Verlaine’s) penis and anus than we do about the intimate anatomy of any other major poet of the past.”

Edmund White recently shared his thoughts, speculations, and convictions about Rimbaud with me from his home in New York City’s Chelsea district.

Michael Ehrhardt: Rimbaud believed he could become a seer through the reinvention of language, what he called the “alchemy of the word” and the “reordering of the senses.” In his famous poem “Voyelles,” he claimed he could detect colors in words; he claims to have invented the colors of vowels. The condition of “synesthesia” is reportedly common among artists and poets. Do you think he suffered from it?

Edmund White: A person who is capable of synesthesia might see colors in the sounds of vowels or in listening to music. While that’s a fascinating part of his work, I think he was influenced in this respect by Baudelaire, who was the great apostle of the idea of synesthesia. Baudelaire’s other famous dictum was to “be drunk, always.” Rimbaud and Verlaine were always imbibing absinthe, which was believed to produce a state of hypercreativity. They smoked hashish as well.

ME: Do you believe Rimbaud was really convinced he could transform life through poetry?

EW: He did believe in the disordering of the senses, of creating a kind of liberating chaos. It might come at a terrible cost to you, not to mention to your friends, but that's all right, because out of this great disorder comes this great poetry. After all, whereas prose is realistic and chatty, poetry has an exalted side to it, where you transform the everyday into the fantastic. For instance, Rimbaud writes about seeing a mosque instead of a factory. He took the idea of being a mage, or seer, quite seriously. He even read books on alchemy and magic. There's a famous letter that he wrote called the "Lettre du Voyant," which he wrote to two different people and stated that the poet must be a kind of seer. Rimbaud's literary era was really at the height of the Romantic period with a capital R, and the notion of the artist was to achieve the sublime. He seriously believed that poetry had these remarkable powers. And when it failed him, or didn't work out that way, he abandoned the whole project with a lot of anger and declared it hogwash. His career as a poet was a very brief, flaming career.

ME: It's fascinating to think that in America Walt Whitman was singing "the body electric" and celebrating the "beautiful and sane affection of man for man," and died a year after Rimbaud did in 1892. Rimbaud was a voracious reader; do you know if he ever read Emerson or Whitman?

EW: There's no evidence of that. But probably not, since, while Rimbaud was very proficient in languages, his grasp of English wasn't all that good. And Whitman hadn't been widely translated during his lifetime, so he couldn't have been an influence. Also, in a provincial village like Charleville, books were scarce and too expensive for a student. When I was doing my research on Genet, who was brought up in a similar village, I discovered that there were only about forty books available there. Remember, this was the era before public libraries. Rimbaud knew the ancient Greek poets and was proficient in Latin. He borrowed all the latest poetry books and journals from his professor Georges Izambard.

ME: Balzac, who was a follower of the mystic Swedenborg, and had already published his *Séraphita* in Rimbaud's era, wrote about an androgynous, angelic creature of a higher intelligence, which seems to anticipate poems like "Genie" or "Antique." Could that have been one source for his poems?

EW: Possibly. In Charleville, he borrowed books from an obese, older gay man, Charles Bretagne, whom he'd met at a local cafe and befriended, and whose opinion he respected. These were books about alchemy, mysticism, and the occult, which were very popular at the time. Swedenborg's philosophy was widespread and had already influenced writers such as Blake and Baudelaire. Baudelaire's famous poem "Correspondences" and longer prose poems must have had an influence on Rimbaud. These studies had a big influence on his poetic language. He also consumed books on science and the latest technology, which encouraged him in his visions of a utopian future. In London, he was constantly going to the library to keep up with the latest developments.

ME: Verlaine had never met Rimbaud before he came to Paris, right?

EW: Right. Verlaine didn't even know Rimbaud was young and cute; it's one thing to invite someone if you know they're a hot sixteen-year-old on the make as a writer—but he was actually impressed by the poetry. Rimbaud arrived with

a secret weapon in his baggage—which was “Le Bateau Ivre,” “The Drunken Boat”—and he read it to a group of poets, and they were just bowled over because no one had ever written anything like it. Mind you, they were competitive artists, not ready to concede their preeminence to a sixteen-year-old raw peasant. But they could all see what a genius he was. Remember, Verlaine’s own poetry took off after he met Rimbaud. I love Verlaine’s poetry as much as I do Rimbaud’s, and I think he was a great genius. But it is true that he responded to the challenge that the younger poet represented. Yet Rimbaud’s behavior was so reprehensible at times that he couldn’t help put the others off. For instance, people would give him their maid’s room to live in, and then he’d piss on everything. Or he’d stand in the window nude and jerk off, or break their heirlooms. He wasn’t a very nice guest.

ME: Did you find any evidence of Rimbaud’s homosexuality before he met Verlaine?

EW: Well, he did write a lot of poems in which he daydreamed about girls. But in the nineteenth century, of course, society didn’t group elements together the way we do today. Verlaine, like Oscar Wilde, was married and a father, and even wrote a lovely poem about how much he loved and physically desired his wife. That he, like Wilde, was attracted to a beautiful boy, was embraced as part of the Greek ideal in which the older man loves the young ephebe and guides and nurtures his intellect. For instance, all of Wilde’s affairs—apart from Lord Alfred Douglas—were with younger, pretty men.

ME: So, Verlaine and Rimbaud were both bisexual?

EW: Yes, and with Rimbaud his sexuality seems to be part of his philosophy of experimenting with all kinds of experiences and sensations. In his “Lettre du Voyant,” he states that the first objective of a seer is to know every part of himself. And you can only know this through the senses. And, after all, he did have respect for Verlaine as a poet.

ME: There’s an almost Oedipal quality to Rimbaud’s love-hate relationship with the older Verlaine. He admires Verlaine the poet, but having grown up constantly abandoned by his scapegrace father, Rimbaud must have subconsciously resented Verlaine for abandoning his infant son Georges. After the whole squalid scandal, couldn’t Rimbaud’s total renunciation of poetry be seen as a metaphor for the seer putting out his eyes to wander in the wilderness?

EW: I don’t believe in the Freudian theory of an Oedipus complex; I think it’s a lot of pseudoscience.

ME: How do you account for Rimbaud’s cruelty towards Verlaine, such as the incident of stabbing him in the hand?

EW: I think there must have been some elements of sadistic provocation in Rimbaud, and I imagine Verlaine enjoyed to some extent playing the part of the put-upon victim. But I don’t think there was anything subconscious or Freudian about it.

ME: Do you believe that Rimbaud’s renunciation of poetry at the tender age of twenty-one is part and parcel of his legend?

EW: Yes. In the aftermath of all these romantic notions of the artist, he turned his back on literature, and money took the place of art. He wanted money—to

be rich, but he wasn't a very good businessman. It's like what Jean Genet said about himself: the only thing he could do was be a genius, and when he wasn't being that, he was just a bad thief. It's like people who have no talent—they only have genius. In Rimbaud's case, I think he really reverted to his mother's values. She was something of a hard-bitten peasant woman who believed in distrusting everyone and was paranoid about everything and tried to accumulate a small fortune and bury it under the bed. Later, Rimbaud kind of subscribed to that notion. He wrote an enormous number of letters to his mother and sister from Africa, always complaining about his luck and about how awful it was to live there. But he was convinced it was worth it, and he would eventually amass a fortune.

ME: After his rupture with Verlaine, Rimbaud lived in London with Germaine Nouveau. Were they lovers as well as colleagues?

EW: Germaine Nouveau, who was a would-be writer, was small, dark, and good-looking—according to photos of him. He and Rimbaud were probably lovers for a short time. But Nouveau became an eccentric and ended up begging outside of churches.

ME: Did you ever find any hard evidence that Rimbaud and his servant boy Djami were lovers?

EW: No, but he did leave Djami something in his will, and he was calling for him in his delirium just before he died. Rimbaud also had a native mistress in Abyssinia; she was black with European features.

ME: Can you imagine poets such as John Ashbery and James Merrill (with his visionary *Scripts for the Pageant*) enjoying the same future, undiminished fame as Rimbaud?

EW: I think Ashbery's poems aren't as translatable or as universal. They're very discursive and free-associated. While Merrill's, although brilliant, are often unfairly interpreted as effete, or—

ME: Too baroque, too gay?

EW: Yes. His work is already beginning to fade from the shelves. It's not yet taken as seriously. I think the writer who comes closest to Rimbaud is the British poet Jeremy Reed, whose influences include Rimbaud, Artaud, and Genet.

New York City Boy: A Conversation with Edmund White

Richard Canning / 2009

From *Chroma*, October 17, 2009, <http://chromajournal.blogspot.com/2009/10/exclusive-interview-with-edmund-white.html>. Reprinted by permission.

Richard Canning: You open with a description of seventies New York: “grungy, dangerous, bankrupt” but artistically in its zenith. That’s pretty evidently meant to contrast with present-day Manhattan. Are there any major cities today which feel especially creative?

Edmund White: I’ve just spent two months in Madrid, which seems vibrant and alive, full of young people who inhabit the center and who stay up all night, a gay life that is flourishing ... New York seems to have lost its edge.

RC: By page two, you’re hanging around, hoping to bump into Susan Sontag or Paul Goodman, author of the journal *Five Years*, a big deal in its day for its openness about his bisexuality and erotic adventures. The contrast in subsequent reputations of this pair is rather poignant, isn’t it? As you point out, Goodman is scarcely recalled today, and almost never read. I wondered if, in the seventies, when the “newness” of gay art and culture and writing was so obvious, you remember having some sense of the people and works that would last? And, in the thirty years that have followed, have those instincts clarified or changed much?

EW: I think I thought that Sontag’s reputation would last because she had so much integrity, was so high-minded and so uncompromising—and because every line she wrote contained a unit of thought. I think I was right. Though people might gibe about those very qualities now, nevertheless she remains a beacon of high culture and seriousness. I also felt that John Ashbery and Elizabeth Bishop and James Merrill were all making lasting contributions, though to my surprise Bishop has nosed her way to the front, and Merrill is now in third position. So I guess I’d say I could spot a winner but couldn’t predict the order of celebrity they would eventually assume.

RC: One of your first lovers then, Stan, you describe as having a “classic” look of beauty which was “generally acknowledged.” Rather cleverly, I thought, you don’t describe him in too much physical detail; the reader can then supply his or her own version of that classical beauty. Do you accept that these things are culturally specific, even as they feel universal, eternal, or classic?

EW: I guess we all prize virility, even a *joli-laideur* now, more than we did back then. Stan had a John Barrymore kind of classical handsomeness that would still be appropriate to a marble statue.

RC: You confess in the book to having been politically apathetic: You also imply that this apathy was widely shared; that nobody thought of there being a gay community or society. Would you say that artists in particular shied away from political engagement? And how much do you think AIDS would change all of

this? (After all, you cofounded GMHC).

EW: I felt generally alienated from the culture and its ideals. I was terribly cynical and astounded that people got so worked up over a “little thing” like Watergate or Chappaquidick, or even cheating over Twenty Questions. I assumed everyone was cheating all the time. This cynicism and a complete sense of disaffection and disabuse kept me away from politics in any form. Larry Kramer sort of shamed me into joining (and eventually heading) GMHC, but I was happy to duck out as soon as possible. Partly I had an artist’s fear of unnecessary and time-consuming entanglements that other people could do just as well or better.

RC: One of the best things about the book is its tender, considered account of long-term friendships, which “feed the spirit”—in particular, through the examples of Marilyn Schaefer, still with us, and David Kalstone, who died. Perhaps this is a topic which fits uneasily in fiction, since its very constancy risks being undramatic; it’s easier to think of fiction bringing to life dramatically the experience, say, of the betrayal of friendship. Were you aware of this book offering the chance to document such friendships, finally?

EW: It seems to me that many people count relatives and mates as their best friends. Some people are extremely attached to childhood friends. I suppose the chance of meeting people later in life and cultivating an intense friendship with them is rare—and perhaps gays, with their (previous) lack of interest in family life and marriage, were best suited for developing these intense friendships later in life (even if “later” is defined as occurring in one’s twenties or thirties).

RC: You describe escaping to Puerto Rico with Stan for holidays, and sexual release there. I suppose it goes without saying that racial politics in gay culture has changed a lot, in the last thirty years. Would you comment? And do you worry about how you represent the racially other in your writings?

EW: Of course there is rather a “colonial” sound to my Puerto Rican adventures, but I think most blacks and Puerto Ricans, for instance, would rather be loved and admired for the wrong reasons than ignored altogether. Anyway, *City Boy* is quite clear about the moment it is concentrating on. It would be ahistorical to attribute to my narrator attitudes that didn’t come into being till much later.

RC: I loved the comment that gay “intellectuals” in the seventies found that, through their learning, they simply had more evidence arguing against their own existence—they could “torment” themselves “with extra zeal” with Freudian ideas. On the other hand, extensive reading in literature has often been described as liberating, particularly at this time, for its offering of role models in fiction and so on, if not always positive ones. Did you encounter, let’s say, untutored gay men whose self-understanding seemed more positive and mature than others,’ in Manhattan in the seventies? And were the books with gay themes that people devoured appreciated, would you say, for featuring gay content at all, or (especially) for featuring positive gay storylines?

EW: I think I was thinking of “nonintellectuals” who weren’t aware of Freud’s prejudices against homosexuality as a form of character disorder or infantilism. They were the lucky ones because they didn’t dwell on all the ways in which they were “sick.” I wasn’t (as you suggest) thinking about those who were versed or unversed in gay literature written by gays. It’s true that if all you’d read was *Giovanni’s Room* or *Death in Venice* or even Proust, you’d come away with a strange view of gay experience. On the other hand, André Gide’s journals

were nourishing because he seemed a self-respecting man with far-flung interests.

RC: You mention revering writers such as Elizabeth Bowen and Graham Greene, considered to have rather unelevated prose styles; “readable” authors, as well as Henry Green, whose prose is somewhat more challenging, surely. Your own fiction has often been viewed as split into two camps—the “readable” autofictional works, and the more baroque, stylized novels such as *Forgetting Elena*, *Nocturnes*, and *Caracole*. Would it be fair, by now, after *Fanny* and *Hotel de Dream*, to argue that the “readability” has won out in your case?

EW: I suppose I lost interest in the degree to which prose seemed “experimental.” What interested me in Graham Greene was the extremely subtle use of figurative language (he’s really the best in the business for similes and metaphors). With Bowen it was the easy way in which she could embed apothems in her running narrative, something I’ve carefully emulated, though it gives a “moralistic” and slightly old-fashioned tone to the writing. Henry Green is a comic genius and his seemingly rattle-brained (but actually very scheming) women are hilarious, and his idiosyncratic use of dialogue is dazzling. I also like his way of letting a sinister subplot slowly emerge. I agree with Ian McEwan that these are writers who’ve been upstaged in literary history by more obvious experimentalists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, though Bowen and Green are better than Woolf.

RC: You make a true, and rather comic observation: that gay men always feel too old, wherever they are, whatever they are doing. It’s poignant, because at first that sounds like a terrible curse or imposition. But once you’ve appreciated the truth of it, it could become liberating, no? Particularly for ... a relatively senior gay man ... (Coughs).

EW: Yes, it is liberating to put all that worrying behind one. Now I have a Spanish boyfriend who appreciates me because I have white hair and I’m chubby—I’m his type! I never would have guessed that when I was young. When I look at the photo Alfred Corn just sent of me when I was thirty-four, I remember I hated my looks then, and thought I was ugly, though in fact I was quite presentable.

RC: I wanted to ask if there’s anywhere in the US you could imagine living today, outside Manhattan? *City Boy* seems to suggest not. You spent a period in San Francisco, and even that didn’t work out ...

EW: I always get this lonely forlorn feeling in other American cities, though I do like to spend a month a year in Key West, and could easily spend more time if I had the money or opportunity. It might be fun to teach for a semester in New Orleans or Austin, but otherwise I’m not too tempted by other cities, especially since I don’t drive.

RC: There’s a provocative moment, where you describe the “three great geniuses of the twentieth century” as “Stravinsky, Nabokov, and Balanchine.” I laughed, because it follows a comment about New Yorkers at that time being “still obsessed with a hierarchy of the arts and the idea of the Pure.” So, here’s another hierarchy! I don’t expect you to back down. But it’s intriguing that you linked these three because of their imperial Russian ancestry, their time in France, and their later careers in America ... Could you say something more about what you mean here by “genius,” or about the way this succession of

transplants may have informed it?

EW: All three of these geniuses are Romantics, or at least are addicts of beauty and a certain dreamy vision of beauty. But at the same time all three are witty and crisp and decidedly “modern.” Balanchine, in his big white ballets like *Symphony in C*, or Nabokov in the love passages in *Lolita*, and Stravinsky in the romantic grandeur of *The Firebird* ... In these works, we feel the grandeur and scope of Imperial Russia. But all three could be very angular and witty as well—Stravinsky in *Jeu de Cartes*, Balanchine in *Agon*, Nabokov in *Pale Fire*. And all three are always renewing themselves—Nabokov in his very late *Look at the Harlequins!* (which is a delicious parody of autofiction and its coarsest preconceptions), Balanchine in a big story-telling ballet such as *Don Quixote* (precisely the opposite of everything he’d otherwise stood for), and Stravinsky in his late, twelve-tone scores such as *Dumbarton Oaks*. I think all three were “light” and flexible and unsentimental, though very romantic because of their years of contact with French culture.

RC: I can’t have been the only person waiting for your take on Susan Sontag, which turns out to be very balanced, and nuanced. You’ve space for her good qualities (“protective and generous,” etc.). On the other hand, I wondered about some of the apparently neutral observations: “Susan was also like a queen in that she had a full life, largely ceremonious”; “Her genius was in saying the obvious in a strong and dramatic manner.” This one, though, took the biscuit for humor: “She should have been given the Nobel Prize. That would have made her nicer.” Ouch! Could you reflect on the uses of humor in the memoir form? Have you erred, ever, or been misinterpreted in the way you’ve laughed about people from your past, or your interactions with them?

EW: Of course the people I write about and their friends are never happy. James Grauerholz just wrote a pretty wounded e-mail to me about my treatment of him and William Burroughs. He thinks I failed to see their love for each other. He also thinks I didn’t really “get” Burroughs. Craig Seligman, who wrote a book about Sontag and Pauline Kael, said I was trashing Sontag, which shocked him since I’d already attacked her in *Caracole*. So I guess we should ask the victims of my humor what they think. I, of course, think I was pretty even-handed. I was determined to be objective or at least fair about Sontag ...

RC: The book ends with AIDS, which, once again, introduces the essential nature of human friendship. It’s a logical close, and leads to your departing for Paris, which you’ve sketched a little already (in *Sketches from Memory*, also published as *Our Paris*). It also brings us to the present, in that we know that the author of *City Boy* is now ensconced in Chelsea. Where do you go from here? It feels as if this may have drained the pool of material for memoir, at least for now. Do you have a fictional project in mind?

EW: I’m a hundred pages into a novel about a straight man and a gay man who are best friends. I’ll follow them through three decades. Then I’d like to do a memoir about Paris in the 1980s. And eventually a memoir about my nephew, Keith Fleming, who committed suicide last spring, and his mother, my sister, whom I’ve almost never written about.

RC: So much to look forward to. Thanks so much for your time.

An Interview with Edmund White

Carlos Motta / 2011

Originally published in *We Who Feel Differently*, February 22, 2011, <http://wewhofeeldifferently.info/interview.php?interview=99>. Copyright © Carlos Motta, 2011. Reprinted by permission.

Edmund White: My name is Edmund White. I am a writer and I have written maybe twenty-five books. I recently finished a novel that will come out next year titled *Jack Holmes and His Friend*, which is about a straight and a gay man who are best friends in New York in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. I am currently working on a memoir about my life in Paris in the 1980s.

Carlos Motta: Where and when were you born?

EW: I was born in Ohio in 1940 and lived there until I was seven.

CM: Where did you move?

EW: Because my parents were both Texans we went to Dallas, but my mother was very restless and she would move every year so we moved all over the Midwest and Texas. When I was fourteen I went to boarding school in Michigan and then I went to the University of Michigan.

CM: Is Michigan where you came out as a gay man?

EW: Actually, I came out very young, at age twelve, even before going to the boarding school in Michigan.

CM: How was the experience coming out at such an early age? What kind of world did you encounter in 1952 when you were coming out?

EW: I think my experiences were fairly bizarre or at least certainly atypical. Some of my first gay experiences were with hustlers in Cincinnati. I had a little summer job working for my father and I would use the money I earned to rent a hotel room and hire much older men to have sex with me. I did that all of the time as a teenager because I could not figure out any other way to have gay sex. I also had sex with the neighbor boy but he was reluctant. I had sex at summer camp with other boys and then eventually I had sex with boys at boarding school. As early as thirteen or fourteen I was having sex with people I met in public toilets, mostly married men who were terrified of me. Our laws make it very hard for young people to see anybody more than once because you are "jail bait," so nobody wants to date you or give you their phone number. There is no continuity in the sex life of a teenager.

CM: It seems like you were a precocious sexual person.

EW: I was precocious in every way. I was very intelligent and wrote a novel by the time I was fourteen. I was a singer, head of the glee club, and got straight A's. I was not athletic, but I was a dancer, and I danced a lot in high school productions.

CM: Despite your own sexual practices, how were you thinking of

homosexuality and how was it presented at the time? How did you fit into the paradigm of the moment?

EW: I thought it was a very bad thing, maybe something slightly glamorous, but bad. I wanted to go to a psychiatrist to be cured, so by age sixteen I was going to a psychiatrist three times a week. I had to tell my parents I was gay in order to get them to pay for the psychiatrist. I always knew I wanted to be a writer and I thought that if you were homosexual and a writer, you would be so limited that nobody would want to read your books, which is sort of true.

CM: What was your experience of homosexual writers at the time? Were you looking for this kind of content in the books that you were reading?

EW: There was Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and André Gide's *Journals*. Eventually in the 1960s there were other things like Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man* and cheap books sold under-the-counter that were pornographic, not with pictures, but with text.

CM: In *Death in Venice*, how did you relate to the gay character that is over-determined by drama and death?

EW: I think almost all the fiction of that period was very homosexual. I related to the idea that homosexuality was bad, but also very glamorous because it involved rich people, doomed people, death ... There were novels about, like *Quatrefoil* and *Finisterre*, and they were about beautiful young men who met each other and lived in some remote place, like a cliff overlooking the ocean, and they would commit suicide. I think it definitely felt like a very doomed, bad thing.

CM: When did you start to think about writing about gay issues? When did it become a priority for you?

EW: Right away. At age fourteen I wrote a novel called *The Tower Window* about a boy who is in love with a girl, but is also fascinated by a Mexican man whom he has sex with. When the girl rejects him, he flings himself at the Mexican man. I had never read such a novel. I invented the genre because it was not pornographic; it was serious and tragic. At that point, nothing I had read was about contemporary American life with gay content.

CM: What about work in other countries? Were you following the path of any international writers?

EW: As a Midwestern schoolboy there were not many chances to hear about those books. The odd thing was that books that had no transparent gay issues were very appealing to gay people. I am thinking of Hermann Hesse's books, specifically *Steppenwolf*, which is about an alienated person who always contemplates suicide and is comforted by the idea that he has an escape from this terrible world. This is something I think many gay people could identify with.

CM: The representation of gayness at this time was relatively tragic, a kind of doomed experience. Were there any positive representations of homosexual life, maybe not in literature, but perhaps in the movies or elsewhere?

EW: I lived in a boarding school. We saw only the movies they showed us every Saturday night in the gymnasium. My parents did not approve of movies so I was never allowed to see a movie before boarding school; my experience of movies was very limited. There was no Netflix or television so the chance of

encountering anything other than standard Hollywood comedies was unlikely. I remember though that in some of those comedies there was a little hint of homosexuality. For example, *Bringing Up Baby*, did you ever see it? I think it is a Cary Grant movie; he wears a dress and uses camp language. There were movies like this, but I would never have been shown a movie like that at the time.

CM: When you wrote your first novel, *The Tower Window*, at age fourteen, did you publish it?

EW: No. I did not really try to get it published.

CM: Was the experience of writing something that you were doing for yourself or were you already thinking of constructing an audience and readership?

EW: I never did it for myself. I have never understood writers who say they write for themselves. The only way I can write is imagining the impact that my writing will have on a reader. There is a kind of criticism called "reader-oriented criticism." I have never read anything about it, but it makes sense to me that you would want to know how you influence the reader. I teach creative writing and what I like about teaching a group of people who have all read the same stories by each other is that you get a lot of reader response.

CM: What is the first book you published that had a readership and that established you as a writer?

EW: My first novel was *Forgetting Elena* and it was well received. Even Nabokov said it was his favorite American novel, which was a good compliment. Still, it was small; it did not sell many copies. My next book, *Nocturnes for the King of Naples* was my first gay book, and it had a small gay following, but the book that had a huge readership was *The Joy of Gay Sex. States of Desire: Travels in Gay America* was a book that received a lot of press attention, and the one that made my name was *A Boy's Own Story*.

CM: Before we speak in depth about some of the books, I would like to ask you when you moved to New York. Was it after you finished college?

EW: Yes, in 1962.

CM: What was New York like at this time?

EW: It was very exciting. It was very different because now the Internet rules everything and there are not as many face-to-face encounters. Back then everything was done on the street because there were virtually no gay bars. The mayor had closed down all the bars to clean up the city for the World's Fair. You walked down Greenwich Avenue or Christopher Street at any hour and there were tons of gay men cruising each other. You had to be good at that, but there were thousands of people and it was very exciting. The very first night I was here a friend of mine took me to a gay restaurant and the idea of a gay restaurant seemed remarkable to me. I knew gays would go to certain places in order to meet each other to have sex, but I couldn't imagine this cursed group of people would ever want to socialize together.

CM: You never previously envisioned it as a kind of community or communities?

EW: Not at all, I had no community feeling. If I had been in a building having sex with other men and as I walked out the building caught on fire, I wouldn't have even turned back to say "fire." To me, these people were not friends,

anybody I liked, or anything. There was so much self-hatred. I was still going to the psychiatrist.

CM: This suggests you considered being a homosexual as exclusively a sexual act?

EW: Yes.

CM: It did not have anything to do with kinship, partnership, or friendship?

EW: I did actually have a lover and he is why I came to New York. This boy I was in love with came here, we lived together almost immediately, and we stayed together for seven years. Still, we did not know any other people like ourselves. We both worked for *Time Magazine* and you could never say that you are gay at work. I would not dare go by his desk too often.

CM: Was cruising on the street also a secret act?

EW: It depended on the place. At midnight on a Saturday night, Greenwich Avenue and Christopher Street would be full of people all cruising each other and it was okay to do. But there was always the possibility you might pick up an undercover policeman who would arrest you.

CM: Was it common to get arrested?

EW: Not too common. It had been where I lived in Michigan. At the University one of my best friends was entrapped by a plainclothes policeman and had to spend the next seven years seeing a psychiatrist once a week. He was on probation for seven years just for touching somebody's penis in a toilet!

CM: Do you remember when homosexuality was decriminalized in the United States? Was it in 1972?

EW: It was never decriminalized throughout the United States; it was only state-by-state. As far as I know there may still be some states where it is illegal. When I was growing up it was still a capital punishment crime. In Georgia, you could cut somebody's head off for being gay.

CM: Where else in New York was gay cruising happening?

EW: Primarily in Greenwich Village. You would go to Times Square where there were shops that sold pornography, but they were always being raided and closed, same with the bars. Maybe around 1966 or 1967, some gay bars began to open. The one that always survived was Julius. It had weird and strict rules sometimes depending on the year. At one point you could not stand at the bar facing the bar, you had to stand at the bar looking out toward the windows because I think they were afraid the police would walk by, see all these men touching shoulders and think that they were maybe touching each other. Even on Fire Island you could not dance with another man even if there was a group. In every group of men dancing, there had to be at least one woman and a guard sat on a very high ladder with a flashlight and would point at people when he suspected there was no woman in the group.

CM: During the 1960s did you have relationships with lesbian women? Was there already a kind of community identification or was it a different situation for women at the time?

EW: One of my closest friends was a lesbian and I was engaged to her briefly. We are still best friends sixty years later. She came to New York at the same

time I came so through her I met other lesbians I don't think I would have met otherwise. I met her when I was fifteen and I did not know she was a lesbian and then gradually we became close and got engaged. I realized she was a lesbian, I was gay, and we went our separate ways. I do not think gay men would have gone to lesbian bars. I went with her sometimes to the Duchess. There were several lesbian bars in the 1960s, but they were not as badly treated by the police as gay bars.

CM: Can you tell me your experience and memory of Stonewall? What happened and how did you relate to these events?

EW: I had a friend called Charles Birch who was a very fiery activist and leftist. I was a rather conventional person, but we were walking by the Stonewall at the very moment when it was raided. We were not inside but we witnessed the customers being dragged out of the bar, put in a Black Maria, and taken away. Some police stayed behind to guard the remaining people because there was not enough room in the paddy wagon for all of them. Most of the people who were arrested were the staff members, but some clients were arrested too. What was remarkable about the experience was that instead of running away and just trying to vanish, which had always been the case for gay people, we rebelled. I think it was for a number of reasons; Judy Garland had just died, it was an extremely hot summer day, and the clients at the bar were mostly black and Puerto Rican. In Greenwich Village these people were called "A-trainers" because they were ghetto kids who took the A train down to the village. They were more accustomed to fighting with the police for other reasons and because all the bars had been closed for so long and now seemed to be reopening, the act to suddenly want to close this bar terrified everybody.

CM: This kind of raid and police brutality was common?

EW: Oh, yes.

CM: It happened all the time?

EW: All the time.

CM: So Stonewall was the point in which people just could not take it anymore?

EW: That is right. It was partly because there had been an unspoken amnesty for maybe two years where bars were not being closed and raided because we had a new mayor, John Lindsay, who was a fairly liberal Republican. He left the gay community alone. The Stonewall was a mafia bar and I think the real reason they raided it was because they suspected drug dealing was going on. It was also very unsanitary with no source of running water behind the bar; they would take old glasses, wipe them out, and serve again. It was really disgusting.

I think historical rebellions like that are always for the wrong reasons, like when the people destroyed the Bastille; there were only seven prisoners in it. There is always some wrong reason, but why not?

CM: How did Stonewall and the period after influence your writing?

EW: Stonewall had a profound effect on me. I would not have been able to predict that a historical event like that could influence my inner feelings so much. I went rather quickly from thinking there was no gay community to thinking there is a gay community, from thinking gays are bad to gays are good, from being ashamed of being gay to being proud of being gay. I always wanted to write about gay subject matter, but suddenly I was interested in addressing a

gay reader. In the past gay writers were apologizing for gay life to straight readers. After Stonewall, but not right away, it took ten years; gay writers were addressing other gay people. It stopped being an apology. It became about communication from one gay person to another.

CM: Did you and your peers recognize Stonewall as a historical event right away?

EW: Yes, it was very clear. It was not two days later, but maybe two weeks later, because there were many articles about it in the *Village Voice*, the *East Village Other*, the *Eye*, and other little leftist magazines. People wrote articles about the significance of it as it happened.

CM: Did you write anything in particular about this?

EW: I wrote a letter that became famous because it is one of the few documents that still exists written by an eyewitness. My friends Alfred Corn, a gay writer, and his wife at the time, Anne Jones, were away for the summer on the West Coast and I wrote them a long letter about what I had seen the next day or two days after the event.

CM: At what point do you start to think of your writings, especially the deeply personal books like your autobiographical novels, as having some kind of political content?

EW: I think every gay writer in the early 1970s was very aware of the possible political content of his work. Because of the almost Stalinist tenure of the gay literary community, there were many gay critics suddenly and they would take writers to task for being politically incorrect. They didn't use that term, but they would say you were not presenting positive role models. There was this idiotic idea that you had to present gay characters in a positive light, which was completely ahistorical. It went against any intelligent point you might have been trying to make. You would not want to show a gay character as being liberated, happy, and positive in a period when he was oppressed. Why would you bother to have a revolution?

CM: How did *The Joy of Gay Sex*, a project that is about a gay audience and for a gay audience, come about?

EW: The English publishing company Mitchell Beazley had packaged and published *The Joy of Sex* by Alex Comfort and it was a huge success all over the world, selling millions of copies. They wanted to repeat their success or at least a small part of it, by having a *Joy of Lesbian Sex* and a *Joy of Gay Sex*. I had to audition for it; there were maybe ten writers who had to submit samples as well as psychiatrists because the idea was that you would be teamed with a doctor. I won the competition.

CM: Was it supposed to be a gay doctor?

EW: It was my own psychiatrist. He was gay. After Stonewall I made the great leap forward of seeing a gay psychiatrist because my idea was that I would now be gay. I didn't want to be straight, but I wanted to be happily gay and sort out some of my personal problems. With the book he quite ethically told me I could not be his patient and collaborator. I was broke and needed money so badly that I stopped being his patient. That book was very successful. People made fun of me for writing it, but Americans love money and anything that makes money they end up respecting.

CM: Who was making fun of you? Your intellectual peers?

EW: Yes. They thought it was a trashy book.

CM: What kind of impact did it have for you and the way that you thought of writing and gayness?

EW: There were so many people out there who were uninstructed and suffering, like a seventeen-year-old boy living in a small town in Missouri, so the idea that you could actually reach and reassure these people was interesting. I liked it. When I wrote *States of Desire*, I wanted to travel and actually meet some of these people. When I wrote *A Boy's Own Story* I wanted to show an in-depth portrait of one of these people, although it is fictional.

CM: When you started writing *A Boy's Own Story*, did you know it would be a long-term project followed by two more books?

EW: No, I didn't. I thought it was a one off and then when it was a success I realized I could continue the story because there were other interesting things to tell. *A Boy's Own Story* is a fairly gloomy look at a teenager who is very conflicted and not happy in the 1950s. I decided to write about that boy coming to New York and having a gay life, but still being very conflicted. The book ends with Stonewall. It is actually a very strong political statement at the end of the novel, which was not popular among serious novelists in those days. As I approached the end of the book I kept debating with myself whether to put that in or not. I thought of Stonewall as the single biggest thing that ever happened to me so decided I might as well put it in.

CM: What is the balance of autobiography and fiction in this series?

EW: There is quite a bit of fiction in them. As I mentioned to you I was very precocious sexually, but the boy in *A Boy's Own Story* is not at all. I was afraid that if I showed a freak like myself having sex with two hundred people by the age of sixteen people would not be able to recognize themselves in the character and think he was sick and should go to a hospital.

CM: You were concerned about the gay reader, not the straight reader judging?

EW: Either one. I thought that nobody would be able to identify with this person whether straight or gay.

CM: At this point have you already established a network amongst other gay writers, be it nationally, or internationally? Is there a community starting to be formed?

EW: I belonged to a writers' group called the Violet Quill, which was sort of a joke. There were eight of us initially and we met over a two-year period during the late 1970s and early 1980s. We would read to each other and it was very exciting to have a group of peers listening to chapters from your book. I was working on *A Boy's Own Story* in fact, and I think it was here we each figured out our turf. Robert Ferro was writing about a gay man who was trying to force his family to accept his lover just as they accepted their daughters- and sons-in-law. It was a very fiery Italian American family he was writing about with high emotions, so that was exciting and interesting. I guess in a way we never discussed it, but I think we thought about what each of us was doing. I was left with childhood and Andrew Holleran, who wrote *Dancer from the Dance*, was left with Fire Island and glamorous New York life. We sort of divided up the world.

CM: You did not write about your life in the 1970s until last year, correct?

EW: Yes.

CM: Can you describe this period of your life and living in New York after Stonewall as a gay man?

EW: It was a very poor city. It was almost bankrupt and there were very few services. The garbage people and the police were always on strike and everything was falling apart. There was what they called “white flight,” white people leaving Manhattan for the suburbs, and there was a very high crime rate and a lot of drug addiction. Those are all negative things, but they meant rent was cheap and you did not have to work too hard to earn enough money to live in Manhattan. My neighborhood, Chelsea, is now very gentrified. Back then it was dangerous to walk through here; there would be black and Puerto Rican men sitting on their stoops. They would throw bottles at you, they had ghetto blasters, and would play loud music. The buildings were very ugly, there were no trees on the street, and everything was very different. The buildings were once quite nice, built as middle-class houses in the nineteenth century, but everything had become very run down.

This was what was also exciting about New York; it was a very edgy city. Suddenly there were many gay bars where there had been none in the 1960s. Now there were back rooms too, which there had never been before. There were the piers, these abandoned docks that stuck out into the Hudson, where people would go and have sex in these big huge abandoned buildings. People would also get up inside the parked trucks under the West Side Highway and have sex. There was a lot of outdoor anonymous sex and this was an interesting era because it was after the invention of antibiotics, but before the advent of AIDS, so it was a small window of humanity, of history, where people were free to do what they wanted to sexually. There were basically no fears about the consequences of sexual acts, even for straight people, because there was birth control and legal abortion, and antibiotics for diseases like syphilis. There was no AIDS so there were not tragic consequences for sex acts.

CM: One of the things about your recent book *City Boy* that stuck with me is your description of different types of relations you had that played different roles in your life, which gestures toward an idea of split kinship and ruptures the idea of a singular monogamous relationship.

EW: Yes, we looked down on monogamy and I think the gay leaders of the 1970s would be appalled to see how many gays now want to be married and monogamous. Pre-AIDS, the idea was to be free, overthrow the heterosexual model, and try to invent something new. Part of that was to separate out the various functions that accumulated in a relationship with one person in heterosexual companionate marriage that, we thought, did not work. It was ending in divorce; it was a disaster.

We thought you should have “tricks” for one night stands for sex, “fuck buddies” you would see on a regular basis for sex, a “lover” who might be somebody you would live and have a physical relationship with or sleep in the same bed and kiss, but maybe not have sex or just occasionally, etc. I think a lot of gay life is still being lived this way, but I think gays have become so prudish that they do not like to admit it anymore. We thought it was a positive experiment. I think AIDS changed all that.

CM: Can you speak about AIDS and its consequences to your work?

EW: I wrote *The Farewell Symphony*. Its title is based on a Haydn symphony where all the instrumentalists get up and leave the stage, one after another until only one is playing at the end.

CM: Was that a metaphor for AIDS?

EW: For AIDS and the way I experienced it. I felt that everybody in my life was dying. Right across the street from where I live is a building with a historical plaque in front of it. It is where we had the first meetings of Gay Men's Health Crisis in 1981. My name is on the plaque because I was the first president of the organization, which is still the largest AIDS organization in the world.

I think at first I did not really respond to the AIDS crisis. From 1986 on, I was working on my biography of Jean Genet and real AIDS activists like Larry Kramer were always angry with me. He would say: "Why are you working on that stupid thing when we need you to write about AIDS," but I felt like gay culture was in danger of being reduced to just one thing, the sickness, so I chose to write about a gay culture hero in the face of the epidemic, which had become so reductive. There was AIDS and that was all; when people thought of gay people they thought of AIDS. We who had been medicalized before and escaped that medical definition of homosexuality were now in danger of being re-medicalized. It was important to resist that. I think the first thing I wrote about AIDS must have been around 1988. It was a little book of stories I wrote with Adam Mars-Jones called *The Darker Proof*. It was published in paperback in England and included stories by us both. Even at that date there was virtually no gay fiction about AIDS being published. When you would watch television, the people talking about AIDS would be a doctor, who was not gay, discussing this terrible condition. It was important that gay writers tried to show AIDS from within, what it was like to live with it.

CM: You did not employ writing as a form of political activism directly along the lines in which other people were?

EW: No, not at all. One of the reasons I moved to Paris was to escape all of this. I had been the first president of the Gay Men's Health Crisis, and I hated it. I did not like myself in that role and I did not like the idea of devoting all my energy to AIDS activism. I am good at writing, and writing always has some political import in the sense that you are reflecting people's experience and showing how a gay man experiences AIDS. I ended up writing quite a bit of literature that has to do with AIDS. *The Married Man* is an AIDS novel and *The Farewell Symphony* is all about people dying of AIDS.

CM: Can you speak more about your biographies of Arthur Rimbaud, Jean Genet, and Marcel Proust? How did you approach that work?

EW: I wrote about Rimbaud, Proust, and Genet, three men I would call homosexual. Rimbaud maybe the least so because he seemed to give it up after a certain age the way he gave up poetry. Although, we do not know when he lived in Africa if he was gay or straight. In any event, the only reason we know about Rimbaud is because in the most significant period of his life, between the age of sixteen and nineteen, he was a great poet.

CM: And because of his relationship to Verlaine ...

EW: That is what the legend is really about. Verlaine was clearly bisexual; he always had women and men in his life. I was very criticized for my little Proust biography by Roger Shattuck and other important Proust scholars in America.

As if I made it so gay and he was not really gay. It is probably because heterosexual critics who have invested their whole lives in writing about Proust don't want him to seem less universal, and if you call him gay it seems to threaten his status as a great universal writer. That is what they think.

CM: As if the impact of his sexual orientation or identity would not mark also the way that he was writing?

EW: Exactly. Proust wrote a very interesting letter to the editor of *Gallimard*, which instructed him to publish the book because it is the first important book about homosexuality. He says it in so many words and yet people conveniently forget that letter and that he calls it an autobiography, although it is clearly a novel.

CM: Throughout your writing career have you faced rejection or discrimination from the literary establishment?

EW: Constantly, but I must point out that the most violent critics, who look down on my work for being so homosexual, have been other homosexuals.

CM: Why do you think that is the case?

EW: I do not know. I think I have had seven long hateful reviews in my life from people who obviously wanted to destroy me, and they were all gay men.

CM: Is the literary establishment itself a homophobic institution?

EW: I think it was in New York more so in the 1960s than it is now. It was very Jewish in the 1960s and I think that the Jews of the generation of Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow were fairly liberal and probably would have worked for gays rights and to end persecution of gays, but I think personally they were freaked out by male homosexuality. I don't think they liked it.

CM: I am struck by the idea of the universality of literature because it presents itself as a monolithic institution that lives outside of the social conditions around it. Do you have any thoughts on that?

EW: "Universalism" was an idea the French invented in the eighteenth century and it was a very progressive idea at the time because it basically said a black woman from the Antilles and a white man from Paris are the same, they are both individuals and they are citizens. The kind of universalism of that period was very progressive. Now, when people use the word *universal*, it is almost always reactionary because they are really trying to say that if you are not writing about a white heterosexual man, then you are not writing about something universal, your work is too particular, you are only writing about a Chinese lesbian, for example, and who could possibly care about that? Straight male critics still dominate the literary field so the reception of literature, whether it is in universities or critical establishments, is still informed by these tastes and prejudices, that are defended by being called *universal*.

CM: When you look retrospectively at your life and your body of work, how do you feel about it?

EW: I feel good about it. I have written some good books. Except for *The Joy of Gay Sex*, I have never done anything that was commercial, or written anything that was designed to capture a market only. I try to hold myself to the highest artistic standards. As a result I am very poor and not very well known. I think I might have had a bigger career if I had been more easygoing or compromising,

but I feel good about this. I think because my father was rich (although I never inherited any money because he gave it to his second wife), this gave me a kind of class confidence that I think was important for me in being able to be a pure artist.

I just wrote an essay about Christopher Isherwood, so I am thinking about him. When you ask how he came to write *A Single Man* in the 1960s, which is really the first openly gay text about contemporary life that has no ideology or apology, but shows him moving around in the normal world and being open about his homosexuality with his heterosexual friends, I think you have two or three answers; he participated in the first gay liberation movement in Berlin in the 1920s and he had a kind of class confidence. He was of the English gentry and I think they have always had a sort of “I can say anything I want to” attitude.

CM: What are your thoughts on aging as a gay man?

EW: I have been very lucky because in the 1950s we used to have a funeral for gay men when they turned thirty and I always thought maybe I could stretch it out to forty. When I got to forty, I thought maybe it could be stretched to fifty. Now I am seventy-one and it seems like I have as much sex as I ever did. Most of that is thanks to the Internet where you can find these highly specialized markets, like attractive people who like older men, even chubbier older men. It is all very organized. Before the Internet I never could have found these people.

Interview: Edmund White

Patrick Ryan / 2012

From *Granta*, March 12, 2012, <https://granta.com/interview-edmund-white/>.
Reprinted by permission.

In the novel *Jack Holmes and His Friend*, Edmund White explores thirty years in the lives of two men: one straight, one gay. Beginning in New York City in the early 1960s, the novel takes several long strides forwards in time, but maintains a linear course. What emerges is a very intimate (and sometimes rocky) portrait of two very disparate lives and the friendship that connects them. *Granta*'s Patrick Ryan speaks with Edmund White about his new novel and the challenge of climbing into the head of a straight man.

Patrick Ryan: As I read *Jack Holmes and His Friend*, I couldn't help but draw comparisons to the work of another one of my favorite writers, Richard Yates. This was partly because of the time period in which the first part of your novel is set, but also because of the voice and—in a certain respect—the sensibilities. It occurred to me that *Jack Holmes* reads like a Richard Yates novel with (almost) none of the anger. Does the comparison strike you as at all apt?

Edmund White: I suppose I wanted the technique of Richard Yates (scenes with lots of dialogue and action) joined to a more sophisticated bantering mode of dialogue, like that you find in Henry Green's *Nothing*, my favorite novel. Although I was trying for the big-city and suburban realism of Yates, I didn't mind adding a bit of fairy dust in the dialogue, also reminiscent of the Waugh of *Vile Bodies* and the Fitzgerald of *Tender Is the Night*.

PR: I think the mix of suburban realism and bantering in your dialogue is perfect because it never stops moving forward. In terms of your prose, *Jack Holmes* is telling the kind of story that was actually occurring at the time in which it's set but that wouldn't have been conventionally told then. And yet the story is delivered in the classic style of that era. Were you conscious of writing in a style that was any different than if the novel had been set during the present day?

EW: There are lots of topical references to the era (the women's store Peck & Peck, the Kennedy assassination). I tried to be accurate about the attitudes of that time (towards sex, politics, marriage, religion) and their shift from the sixties to the seventies. There were almost no books back then about bisexuality. Of course in every era there are extraordinary books—like *Five Years*, Paul Goodman's 1966 journal, which discussed his work as a psychotherapist, his marriage and children, and his voracious homosexuality. I guess I'm saying that *Jack Holmes* might have been written back then, but probably not with so much explicit sex.

PR: And I noticed that Jack's arc, over the course of the book, is very different from Will's. While Will is unwittingly the source of some of Jack's emotional struggles (since Jack is, for a long time, in love with Will), Jack proves to be an agent of struggle on Will's part because he helps Will find a mistress. One could

weave all sorts of tapestries thinking about the various themes at play here ... but while you were writing, did theme(s) enter your head at all?

EW: Proust said that a novelist has to make himself a bit stupid and I certainly comply in that regard, meaning I don't search too far for the wider implications of my work. Incidentally, I'm not sure Jack intends to fix Will up either with his wife Alex or his mistress Pia. It's just that Jack is an attractive, sociable man and lots of people swirl around him.

PR: Oh! I guess he was so attractive to me that I couldn't help but assign him a few devious motives. Getting back to the arcs: Were you always certain how Jack and Will would end up, by the close of the novel? Or, another way of asking: To what degree did the events in the book just unfold, rather than having been charted out? Was it often a process of what, in the past, you've called "marinating"?

EW: I did do a lot of daydreaming or "marinating" on my couch (the expression is Flaubert's). I had this vision of Jack, for instance, standing on a toilet so he could peer over the wall at Will to see his penis and only by chance does Will glance up and catch Jack at it. One of my Amazon readers (female) strenuously objected to the verisimilitude of this scene. Perhaps she was right, though I could see it so clearly and it seemed sort of daring, like a Dickens moment that expresses in a condensed image an underlying reality—and I thought, what the hell, I should risk it.

I kept thinking of the adage that a successful novel is one that squeezes the last bit of juice out of the lemon, that fully exploits its theme. I kept inventing actions that would help me to realize that goal. The advantage of having a rich *donnée* is that it suggests many ways to exploit it.

PR: Can you talk a little about the point-of-view switches that occur in the novel? Both Jack's and Will's perspectives are offered, and while you write about Jack in the third person, you write about Will in first person. Do you think this approach allowed you to sufficiently distance yourself from Jack to keep him from being you, and sufficiently cozy up to Will to allow you to think as he does? Or am I the last annoying person on Earth who cares about discussing point-of-view switches?

EW: No, it's a question central to the book. I wanted to keep Jack a bit mysterious and I wanted to be able to characterize him. You can say of a character that he was charming but elusive; you can't write, "I am charming but elusive" unless you're portraying a madman. I wanted readers to fall in love with Jack a bit, and the third person promotes the necessary distance for the objectification of love. As you point out, as a gay writer I accepted the challenge of rendering a straight man in the first person—albeit a sensitive straight writer.

PR: And both characters are utterly convincing—particularly when they're privately trying to figure each other out. At one point, Will is considering the changes Jack has undergone over the years, the evolution of him as a man. "Jack was no longer a faggot," he thinks. "He was gay." This is a very tiny and yet crucial moment in the novel. What's the distinction going on in Will's head, and what does it say about his own character?

EW: In the sixties, Will feels he's courageous even to have a gay friend, who could destroy his own reputation at work and among his friends and family. But by the 1970s, after gay liberation and the sexual revolution, the "Studio 54"

revolution, Will realizes that now it is chic to be gay or know someone gay (everyone wants one, he thinks, just as everyone wants one black friend).

PR: Can you tell us what you're working on now?

EW: I'm writing a memoir about Paris in the eighties called *Paris Gossip*. I lived in Paris for sixteen years and worked for Condé Nast as a journalist (*Vogue*, *House & Garden*, *Vanity Fair*, etc.). Mean readers are always accusing me of being gossipy (I never know if that's an insult or a compliment but I suspect both, a way of saying that something is low and indiscreet but also entertaining and sizzling), so I thought I'd own the word, in the same way the Impressionists embraced the critical word hurled at them. Although I always felt marginal in Paris because I was a foreigner, I did get to meet "everyone" and to observe many interesting shifts in fashion, mores, politics, values.

Edmund White: Invention, Imagination, and Memory

Frank Pizzoli / 2012

From the *Lambda Literary Review*, March 19, 2012, <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/features/03/19/edmund-white-invention-imagination-and-memory/>. Reprinted by permission.

At a recent reading by Edmund White from his current novel *Jack Holmes and His Friend* (Bloomsbury) at Philadelphia's Giovanni's Room, the country's oldest gay and lesbian bookstore, the audience leaned toward older gay men sprinkled with curious younger readers. A few days earlier the fiercely productive White had described the novel as "my most popular novel so far" when he talked with writer Frank Pizzoli about some general literary themes and some specific criticisms of his work. Pizzoli last interviewed White for *LLR* in March 2007. White's *Sacred Monsters* (Magnus Books), more than twenty essays collected in book form, was also recently released. Currently, he's working on another manuscript about his years in Paris.

Often steeped in controversy, White remains unabridged.

Recently White's been criticized by the *Los Angeles Review of Books* for his work not being "universal," a barb also issued by Daniel Mendelsohn in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*, where they both have a byline. About *Jack Holmes*, Martin Amis wrote in the *London Sunday Times* that the novel contains "startling perceptions of American society ... as character after character is delicately and colorfully rendered and one social milieu after another brought vividly to life. White is a connoisseur of the nuances of personality and mood, and here unveils his very human cast in all their radical individuality." The *LST* reviewer Edmund Gordon wrote that the novel is "a triumphant return to form ... his best yet."

Embracing comments on White's work reflect what French critics wrote upon release of *A Boy's Own Story*, when they credited him with a "Proustian sensibility" and compared his prose to Henry James. *Paris Review* interviewer Jordan Elgrably thought his highest good "is the truth of the imagination." His fourth novel, *Caracole*, was described by the British magazine *Time Out* as "elegant, fabulous, almost sublime." William Goldstein wrote in *Publishers Weekly*, "To call Edmund White merely a gay writer is to oversimplify his work and his intentions." Christopher Bram's recently released *Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America* relies on White's influence as a writer to shape the second half of his jam-packed scoring of what Bram calls the literary revolution turned social revolution.

The National Book Critics Circle finalist and author John Irving (*The World According to Garp*, *Cider House Rules*) calls him "one of the best writers of my generation." The same age as White, John Irving has said about White's *A Boy's Own Story* that when he first read the book in the early 1980s he "thought that the novel spoke much more to me about a boy coming of age (even though it's about a gay boy coming of age, and I'm not gay) than J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* ever did." Still others are less certain of his "universality," as

one online commentator thought “he’s received enduring credit for being the first to publish certain material—not the best.” Another online reader commented that White is “one of our best chroniclers of gay life, sex, AIDS, and aging. I’m glad writers like Irving recognize his universal importance.”

Frank Pizzoli: In his review of *City Boy: Life in New York During the 1960s and '70s*, Daniel Mendelsohn writes in the *New York Review of Books*, “What’s most pressingly at stake for him (White), in writing ostensibly about arts and letters, is the artists and the *lettres*, the social and personal aspect of literary production.” What’s wrong with focusing on the social and personal aspects of literary production?

Edmund White: I believe that the fame of an artist or writer is mostly due to his legend, rather than his work. Look at Van Gogh, Rimbaud, Hemingway, Gertrude Stein. If we’re honest about it, most of us respond to the extra-artistic image these people have. As a writer of biography (Proust, Genet, Rimbaud), I’m obviously interested in the life as well as the work.

FP: How does this idea play into the work you produce? In regards to your forthrightness in writing about your own life, warts and all? Do you find this has contributed to your own fame?

EW: I never think about that.

FP: “Universalism” is a blessing and a curse. Your work has just been criticized by the *Los Angeles Review of Books* for not being universal. Using your interaction in *City Boy* with then-Raritan editor Richard Poirier as an example, Poirier became “furious” for your suggesting that there may be “gay” fiction, poetry, even a gay sensibility. Also, critic Daniel Mendelsohn underscores Poirier’s reaction to you as you wrote it: “a betrayal of every humane idea of literature.” Pretty stiff indictment?

EW: I’m so bored and offended by that objection. They wouldn’t dare criticize a black or Jewish writer in the same way.

Mendelsohn didn’t read my pages very carefully, because at the end of the discussion I concede that I now largely agree with Poirier, though at the time I thought he was ignoring an exciting new possibility in art. In the intervening years there certainly have been many splendid gay novels and gay literary studies.

I suppose the more specific writing is the more it intrigues the general reader. I just finished a splendid memoir, *What to Look for in Winter* by Candia McWilliam, who is a Scottish aristocrat and novelist who has gone blind and faced two unsuccessful marriages. In no way does her story parallel mine, but I identified with every page.

Readers and playgoers like a work that explores all the codes and systems of a particular world—that’s why paranoia is such a good starting point for a novel (*Pale Fire*). Or why *Moby-Dick* is so compelling.

Like every writer, I hope that my work will eventually reach a large audience. In the nineteenth century it mattered desperately whether one was a Romantic, Realist, or Naturalist but now we read with equal interest Hugo, Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola.

FP: Daniel Mendelsohn has criticized *A Boy’s Own Story* because he feels that in the manuscript “life” overtook “art.” What’s wrong with that? Isn’t the twentieth century full of exclamations and warnings that art reflects life, that

life reflects art, and now with reality TV, who can know? You mentioned during our first interview (March 2007, *Lambda Literary Review*) that Andy Warhol had arranged to spend time in a Greenwich Village shop one Saturday, asking people to bring him whatever they wanted him to sign. He was, in your words, asking the questions, Is this art? Could this be art?

EW: Actually *A Boy's Own Story* only loosely echoes my own life. I was precocious intellectually and sexually, won prizes, published stories and poems, and slept with five hundred people before I was sixteen—quite unlike the shy, un-brilliant boy in my book.

FP: Is there a gay sensibility? At moments, Mendelsohn sounds like a White Colonialist scolding natives for not acquiescing that he knows better than they, and everyone else, what's good, what's not.

EW: I never read the Mendelsohn article so I have no idea what he says; my partner warned me off it, since hateful criticism has a way of searing itself into my brain. I don't think there is one gay sensibility any more than there is a black or Jewish sensibility.

FP: Speaking of "gay sensibility," was it a struggle to inhabit a straight male voice in your current novel *Jack Holmes and His Friend*?

EW: Not at all. After all, gays only make up about 3 percent of the population so we spend our whole lives "translating" straight movies, books, ballets into gay terms and studying the heterosexuals around us—we know much more about them than they know about us, just as blacks know a lot about whites but whites know virtually nothing about blacks.

FP: I think this is the first time you have inhabited a straight male voice.

EW: Fiction is an accumulation of little true facts that are made dynamic—it's always an exciting challenge to pull that off.

FP: You're good friends with John Irving and now he's featuring a lead bisexual male character in his next novel. Coincidence?

EW: One due more to the fact that his grandfather was a cross-dresser who often appeared in amateur theatricals as a woman, and that his own son is gay.

FP: You admire both Alan Hollinghurst and E. M. Forster, one writing as an openly gay man, one not. Might Forster's work have been different had he been "out"?

EW: Of course, Forster did write a gay book, *Maurice*, except he wouldn't let it be published in his lifetime. Proust wrote a lot about homosexuality but not his own. The narrator is one of the few characters who stays straight till the end. Gays in the past, like Proust, had to be inventive and imaginative and have excellent memories, because they were always transforming their loves from Phil to Phyllis. Invention and imagination and memory are all good tools for a novelist.

FP: Help us understand the Violet Quill. Looking back, the group—Christopher Cox, Robert Ferro, Michael Grumley, Andrew Holleran, Felice Picano, Edmund White, and George Whitmore—met only seven times over one year but set into motion a literary movement. As you've said: The gay community was despised in the fifties, liberated in the sixties, partied large across urban settings in the seventies, and started dying off in the eighties. Did the "Quill" chime history's

clock at just the right moment?

EW: We were enabled by the invention of new gay publications such as *Christopher Street* and about seventy new gay bookstores across the country (now sadly shuttered). We were suddenly writing fiction that addressed the gay reader, not the straight one, and that did not provide an explanation of where Fire Island was or how our characters came to be gay. We used those meetings partly to divide up the turf—Ferro got the family, I got childhood, Holleran got New York and Fire Island, etc.

FP: This month in Melbourne (February 2012) there's an international conference, "After Homosexual: The Legacy of Gay Liberation." Not long before his death you spoke on camera with father of Off-Off Broadway Doric Wilson, of Caffè Cino fame, both of you lamenting the arrival of "assimilation." Are we approaching post-gay?

EW: Post-gay has long been with us—think of Michael Cunningham's books. I regret the passing of a bohemian, Leftist gay life that was accepting of all outsiders, the mixed gay couple, the dwarf, the homeless old lady. You used to see all these people in gay bars—now they're all frightfully exclusive.

FP: In a 1988 interview for the *Paris Review* with Jordan Elgrably, the same year *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* was published, you note the difference between being a journalist and a novelist and being a typical New Yorker in that you had a keen eye for the publishing market. Yet you became discouraged with that constant drumbeat and wrote *Forgetting Elena*, your first published novel and one you wrote to please yourself, not a potential market. In your more recent work, have you been able to balance all those competing forces?

EW: Of course writers in this difficult world are very aware of the market, since even established authors have trouble getting published; recently Christopher Bram said he wrote *Eminent Outlaws* because he wasn't sure he could find a home for his fiction. The theme of a novel now must be obvious and striking, even in a quick summary.

FP: André Gide said that with each book a writer should lose the admirers he gained with the previous one. Are you losing admirers along the way?

EW: Surely.

FP: For what reasons may you be losing readers? And on the flipside do you feel you gained some admirers? What does this new audience look like?

EW: Some gay readers resented the amount of straight sex in *Jack Holmes*, just as they disliked a "straight" novel such as *Caracole*, which some gay bookstores refused to handle.

FP: You've said that each good novel should advance a, not the, theory of the novel. Still believe that?

EW: Yes, for instance, *Jack Holmes* uses a scenic technique I've never explored before of action and dialogue and less description and analysis than in my previous books—the Richard Yates approach, you might say.

FP: Referring to *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*, what did you mean by saying you wanted to show the puritanical oppression of sexual freedom? How is sexual freedom oppressive?

EW: I mean that sexual freedom is oppressed in our country, not that sex is

oppressive. Sorry about the confusion.

I recognize that passion is usually a destructive force; I agree with Racine, Shakespeare, Flaubert, and Tolstoy.

FP: Does your current novel *Jack Holmes and His Friend* reflect that same sentiment about love and passion?

EW: No, my characters are not tragic.

FP: You've said your unpublished novels written in the fifties and sixties gather dust, although you have mined them for future works. About the tone of those earlier works you've said, "In the sixties we harbored utopian notions that were extremely naïve." What utopian, naïve notions does the gay community hold today? That all of us want to get married? Have kids? Serve in the military? Be a jock? Or is the quilt picture of our community simply more complete these days?

EW: Many gays think that if only they could have all the freedoms that straights enjoy they'd be happy—which seems naïve.

FP: You participated in the 1969 Stonewall Riots, which you considered a rather silly event at the time, calling it more Dada than Bastille. Is the gay liberation movement still more Dada than Bastille? Younger activist groups, like GetEQUAL, are storming HRC like the Bastille.

EW: I'm afraid the gay community these days is very corporate and serious.

FP: You've said about yourself: "I keep feeling I've accomplished nothing, never written a 'real' novel." That was 1988 when you, and gay men everywhere, were struggling intensely with the unreality of AIDS, the fast, sequential loss of friends. Still feel that way?

EW: I feel that *Jack Holmes* is my first "real" novel in that it is a page turner, has action and dialogue, and evokes duration as well as time passing—all the hallmarks of a real novel.

FP: And, finally, with every good sentiment in mind, how has, if at all, your recent stroke affected your thoughts about writing in general, your writing, your view of the world?

EW: Everything seems to be conspiring to make me simplify, simplify. The stroke only exacerbated that tendency.

Q&A with Edmund White

Jon Wiener / 2014

From the *Nation*, April 14, 2014, 5. Reprinted by permission.

Edmund White, a member of the Stonewall generation, is the author of several award-winning memoirs and novels, including *A Boy's Own Story* and *City Boy*. His new memoir is *Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris*. This interview has been condensed and edited.

Jon Wiener: A lot of what you've written celebrates "the golden age of promiscuity" in 1970s New York. That seems at odds with the gay marriage movement today.

Edmund White: First, I was opposed to gay marriage because it seemed like one more way that gays were wanting to assimilate. When I realized the Christian right was so opposed to it, as well as tyrannical governments in Africa and Russia, I thought, "It must be a good thing to fight for." Now I have a confession to make: I got married in November to my friend Michael Carroll, whom I've been with for nineteen years. At least we didn't rush into it.

JW: When you arrived in France in 1983, was homosexuality a crime?

EW: No. Mitterrand had decriminalized it when he was elected in 1981. It was extraordinary. Suddenly the police were no longer allowed to raid gay bars or pick up gay people having sex in the park.

JW: Homosexuality in France has an interesting legal history.

EW: It was decriminalized by the French Revolution. Everything was fine until the Vichy government, which was in cahoots with the Nazis; they passed laws targeting homosexuals. It wasn't until the Socialists won in 1981 that things changed again.

JW: When you left the United States in 1983, you were a famous gay writer. What did the French think about gay fiction?

EW: America thrives on identity politics, left and right. But France is opposed to the idea. Since the Revolution, the French have enthroned the idea of universalism. All of us must be equal before the law as abstract individuals, and that extends to the arts. Nobody in France would ever say "He's a Jewish novelist" or "She's a black novelist," even though people do write about those subjects. It would look absurd to a French person to go into a bookstore and see a "gay studies" section. Even today.

JW: Michel Foucault died of AIDS in 1984—what had his understanding of AIDS been?

EW: I'd told him about it in 1981 when I was visiting, and he laughed at me and said, "This is some new piece of American Puritanism. You've dreamed up a disease that punishes only gays and blacks? Why don't you throw in child molesters too?" The doctors were afraid to give him a diagnosis because he had written *The Birth of the Clinic* and other books that were critical of the medical

profession.

JW: Was there a test for the AIDS virus in 1984?

EW: Not until '85. We didn't even understand the viral nature of the disease. I found out in 1985 that I was positive, and I assumed I would be dead in two years. But I was what they called a "slow progresser."

JW: Did your positive diagnosis galvanize you into writing more? That's when you launched your gigantic Genet biography project.

EW: That was a kind of talismanic, magical, irrational act. I knew it would take years and years to complete, and it did in fact take seven years to write. If I had only two years left, I would never finish it.

JW: How did the Genet project go over with your friends back in New York?

EW: Larry Kramer, a wonderful fighter for gay people, felt that I was letting down my side by writing about something so far-fetched. But I didn't just want to write about AIDS. I thought gays had been medicalized for a hundred years before Stonewall, and now we were in danger of being re-medicalized.

JW: How is your health today?

EW: I had a stroke last year. This book I wrote mostly in the hospital. I couldn't walk or talk, but I could still scribble.

JW: The French named you a Commander of the French Order of Arts and Letters—congratulations!

EW: Thank you. It's a rank I share with Sylvester Stallone.

The Art of Being Edmund White: A Capstone Interview

Will Brantley and Nancy McGuire Roche / 2016

Conducted by Skype, Nashville and New York, November 19, 2016. Previously unpublished.

Will Brantley: Let's start on a light note with a question sometimes posed in gay circles. Who are your divas and why do you think gay men need their divas?

Edmund White: I'm not that really into divas. I mean, I never worshipped singers or dancers. I was always the guy who was into Balanchine, not his dancers. I was the guy who always liked a composer and not a singer. And so why do gay people need divas? Well, I think they are emblems of suffering. You know, I think gay men, at least in the past, used to always fancy themselves as suffering—as very glamorous, but suffering. The Judy Garland image is sort of somebody who is constantly fighting alcoholism and horrible men, and I think the idea is that a kind of wonderful art comes out of all that and that you can be sustained by your talent in the face of all adversity. Most of those gay divas are about suffering.

Nancy McGuire Roche: I remember you once told Terry Gross in an interview that you felt that Americans had dismissed gay culture with the election of George Bush, a born-again Christian with no sympathy for gay rights. In the last decade we have seen a liberal black man elected to America's highest office, and then recently a wide political swing to the right. When do you think America will see our first openly gay president?

EW: Never. I mean, I don't think ever, because we're always banging on about family values. And now it's true that gays have families; however, it's unlikely that any gay will be in the White House, if people know he's gay. Maybe there'll be some closet queen?

NMR: So your answer is actually “never.”

EW: Never.

NMR: And when do you think we'll see a woman in the White House?

EW: Well, it could have been this time. I don't think people are so opposed to women, especially if they're mothers or grandmothers, and have family values.

NMR: You took part in the Stonewall riots. Did you ever think the Stonewall Inn would be designated as an historical landmark?

EW: We did think of it almost instantly as a historic event. I am surprised that society has honored it. But at the time we thought of it sort of like the Bastille because, to our knowledge, it was the first time that gays had ever resisted arrest. And almost every occasion like that is inappropriate—like the taking of the Bastille. There were only seven people in it. One was Sade, who clearly belonged in it!

NMR: Twenty-five years ago you said to me that you would rather be remembered as a gifted writer instead of a gifted gay writer. Do you still feel this way?

EW: Well, I've gone through an evolution on that. Because before AIDS I sort of thought of my ideal reader as Mrs. Nabokov, somebody who wasn't gay, who wasn't American, but who knew English perfectly, and was a good reader. I felt that would help me screen out preaching to the converted. But then after AIDS came along, I felt very isolated in France where there wasn't that much of an AIDS community, at first. And I realized I was HIV positive, so I began to see my ideal reader as another gay man more or less my age, probably HIV positive. I remember Milan Kundera once said to me that the way a book is initially received determines its fate for the next thirty years. It's true that if you're branded a gay writer at the beginning, then you're a gay writer for years to come.

WB: You've given hundreds of interviews since your first novel was published in 1973, and you must no doubt tire of predictable questions. But is there any one question that has *not* come up? Any topic that has surprised you by its repeated absence?

EW: "How much money do you make?" I recall hearing the gay writer Robert Glück when he came to talk at Brown, and he said, "I could tell you I wanted to kill my mother or that I had killed my mother and you wouldn't have lifted an eyebrow, but if I told you I made \$10,000 last year as a writer you would be horribly shocked." That's the one question people never ask and the one reality they don't want to face.

WB: It's pretty clear from the interviews in this volume that you feel a deep attachment to your fiction, yet some readers may know you primarily as a biographer, a memoirist, or a cultural commentator. Your collected works are more or less evenly split between fiction and nonfiction. Do you see threads that connect these two strands of your writing?

EW: Everybody makes such a great distinction between fiction and nonfiction. And I do between my purely imaginative fiction like, let's say, *Our Young Man*, where I made it all up, and fiction based on my life, like *A Boy's Own Story*, or my memoirs. But there's a very vague line between them. I've written autobiographical fiction, which I call fiction, because I'm allowed to change the dates and put in things that are counterfactual, but if you call it a memoir then you've signed a contract with the reader to tell the truth and nothing but the truth.

NMR: In one of the interviews collected here you stated that you often create characters by writing a sketch of someone you know, and eventually they become a character in their own right. Do you feel that you merge with this other person when you are creating the character, who becomes partially the person you know and partially yourself? And if so, how does that change your relationship with the real person?

EW: Well, what I meant to say is my method used to be, and sometimes still is, to take something, a moment out of my life, something I've lived, and assign it to somebody I know. That way, you get both the pleasure of imitation—you get to imitate, to draw a portrait of someone you know—and you get the pleasure of invention. You have that person doing things he never would do in real life. I've used that technique in many stories. And what effect does it have on

relationships? Not good. It never is good. People are very confused by it. I had one friend who translated *The Stranger* by Camus. He knew I'd written a story about him called "Running on Empty." He found it insulting and despair making to the degree that it differed from reality. He was on the edge of dying from AIDS, and he wanted *his* story to be told, not some weird fictitious story. So it never works out. Everybody always hates you for it.

NMR: You have also stated that you feel the self is an illusion. Do you think future readers will be able to separate you (the writer) from the artifact (the work) you have created?

EW: When I was young, I was a Buddhist and I didn't believe in the self. And I thought the point of nirvana was to undo the illusion of self and sink back into nothingness. But I've always found that idea incompatible with being a novelist, because it seems to me that novelists do nothing but study the self—or other people's selves. And if you don't believe in the self, you can't be a novelist. So I eventually gave up my Buddhist ideas in favor of a much more commonsensical notion, what we'd call a realistic sense of self.

NMR: When discussing Michel Foucault, you stated that he was "in favor of the idea of the self as an artifact rather than the self as an avowal."

EW: What impressed me with Foucault is that he thought in Christianity people feel they have only one big secret, which is the truth about them, which with gay people is their homosexuality, and that all of their life is aiming towards this confession, this avowal that "Yes, I am gay." And that tells you something fundamental and deep about them. Foucault did not like that idea. He thought it was, in most cases, a fairly superficial thing about somebody—your sexuality. And he thought it was an echo of Christianity, where you're constantly looking for a sin you can avow, and that will then change your life. He was opposed to that, the culture of avowal.

NMR: Do you think your own fiction shapes you as a person?

EW: Do I feel that I've created myself through my writing? I would say "yes." I see it less as creation than exploration. For instance, if I write a book like *Fanny: A Fiction*, I get to feel like a white woman in 1820 who has a black lover. All that I invented—and I enjoyed that. When I write fiction that's made up, that's not autobiographical but creative, I do a thing that Flaubert calls the marinade. You lie on your couch for hours and hours and you try to daydream your way into the life of the characters. And that can be very creative and exciting, the marinade.

WB: You've been both celebrated and condemned for the candid and sometimes explicit nature of your writing. You could of course play it safe, but you've tended to take another route. What do you think prompts your drive to tell all?

EW: I've always been very interested in telling the truth. That's why Tolstoy is one of my favorite writers, because he tells the truth in a way that almost nobody else does. As far as talking about sex, I feel like it is a very important thing to us and very revelatory about our character, but almost nobody writes about it. There are different kinds of writing about sex. There's pornography, which is a kind of marital aid and which is supposed to excite you. Sontag wrote an essay about how that has to be very formulaic because it has to follow the exact rhythm of masturbation and has to excite you in a quantitative and progressive way. But I don't write that. I don't write to excite readers sexually. I

try to portray realistically what goes on in people's minds when they have sex, and that's usually comic, because the body fails the spirit.

WB: Only one interviewer in this collection mentions the historical novel that you just referred to, *Fanny: A Fiction*, your account of nineteenth-century novelist Frances Trollope and social reformer Frances Wright. Does it matter to you that the audience for *A Boy's Own Story* might not be the same audience for *Fanny: A Fiction*, or the essays you collected in *Arts and Letters*?

EW: Well, it mystifies me in a way that whenever other people discuss, even my students, discuss fiction, they'll say, "Well I didn't like that book 'cause I didn't like that character." And I'm like, "What?" I mean it seems dumb to me. Even daily newspaper reviewers say things like that—that this is a very attractive character and you long to be in his company. And it is a very curious thing that *sophisticated* readers will spend hours and hours reading about a character whom they wouldn't sit down and have a drink with in real life.

WB: Is there any one of your books that you would like for readers to reconsider—or perhaps consider for the first time? Did any one work seem to fall by the way?

EW: Well, *Caracole* certainly did, but I think it's a deeply flawed book, so I'm not so unhappy that it's ignored. I think the best-constructed book I wrote is *Hotel de Dream*. It's very short and full of feeling. I really enjoyed working on that one, and I feel that it's at least formally the most successful of my books.

NMR: Your best-known play, *Terre Haute*, first staged in 2006, centers on fictional meetings between two characters based obviously on Timothy McVeigh, the man who bombed the Oklahoma Federal Building in 1995, and novelist Gore Vidal. Why were you drawn to the dramatic mode for this particular work?

EW: Well, I had a boyfriend at the time who was an actor and thought he looked like Timothy McVeigh. So he asked me to write a play for him, which I did. So it was just that simple—and then the whole thing became kind of goofy. I was at the Edinburgh writers festival and there was a very cute guy in line to get his book signed, and I was thinking how can I interest him? And he said that he was working with a theater group, with the odd name of Nabokov, in England. And I made a whole big fuss about my play and how I would give it to him, and of course he instantly quit the company and joined another one. But then, I'd fallen into the midst of this very left-leaning theater group that was interested in the play because it could be read as an anarchistic attack on society. They had their own political stake in it, and they put it on very nicely in England, all over England, and also in America. But anyway, it was all just pure serendipity—like almost everything.

WB: Hollywood has not pounded at your door, and yet many of your books—*Jack Holmes and His Friend* comes to mind—could make terrific films. Which novel do you think might have the greatest potential for successful screen adaptation?

EW: Well, people have tried to get *A Boy's Own Story* off the ground, though there's not really much plot, and it's more of a mood piece. It has never happened, but it's been optioned several times. People have tried to launch *Jack Holmes* and also *The Married Man*. Franco-Anglo producers have tried to get that one off the ground, and it's been through many scripts, but never one that

appealed to anybody.

The trouble is if you do a script like *The Married Man*, it has to be set in the period before AIDS was cured. Not that AIDS is cured, but there's good medicine for it now. So in other words, it has to be set in the eighties. But that is almost as expensive as doing a movie set in the 1780s, because you have to have different home furnishings, clothes, cars, different wires up above, different everything. Practical things like that constantly defeat these projects.

WB: Having lived through and documented the dark era of AIDS, how do you feel about a sexual landscape in which medical advances like PrEP now make it possible for gay men to have casual and "unprotected" sexual encounters without fear of contracting HIV? And on a related topic, why has the media not celebrated these medical breakthroughs? Is there still a fear of advocating anything that might prompt an open discussion of what gay men enjoy doing when they hook up with one another?

EW: There is always a residual Puritanism in America that would make any discussion of sex verboten. But I think that the real thing is that they're afraid of encouraging people to have unsafe sex—to say oh well, you know, it's not so serious anymore; you can be on PrEP, or if you do contract the disease, we have the triple therapy to hold it in check. I think that if I were running a program to dissuade young people from having unsafe sex, I would emphasize the fact that if you live for years and years with HIV it can have serious consequences for your heart, and it can have serious consequences for premature aging. Now, no gay man wants to hear about premature aging.

NMR: You've written plenty about New York's literary/intellectual/cultural scene of the 1960s and 1970s. How would you compare the current scene with those heady days?

EW: I don't really participate too much. Well, I do a little bit. I belong to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, but they don't do much in terms of speeches. The thing I used to head, which was the New York Institute for the Humanities, still exists but it seems to be somewhat less exciting than it used to be. It's part of NYU. Columbia has its global program but I think the terrorism in Europe has curtailed its activities. American students don't want to go to Europe anymore, or their parents don't want them to go because they're afraid of terrorists. American schools in Europe are doing very badly, and many of them are going to close down because of terrorism. I suppose the ideal place for intellectual activity is the university campus, especially a university like Princeton. But we're so quarantined off from each other, we never see anybody in the other departments. Joyce Carol Oates is one of the few people I know who really will make a point of cultivating the important philosopher of the moment or the important painter of the moment, or whoever. She is always extending her intellectual range.

WB: Your most recently published memoir, *Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris*, is actually your third book to focus on the city of light; the others are *Our Paris: Sketches from Memory*, published in 1995, and *The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris*, which appeared in 2001. Looking back, were you attempting to capture different things in each work? Can we now refer to the three as your Paris Trilogy?

EW: I hadn't thought of that! The first one I wrote because I had a French lover, whom Nancy knew well, Hubert, and he had to quit being an architect, because

of AIDS. And then he was doing rather spiteful, nasty cartoons that offended everybody. So I thought maybe I could head him off at the pass by writing these kind of anodyne portraits of our everyday life. Every night before I'd go to sleep, I'd write another little portrait, another little passage, which he would then illustrate, and that became *Our Paris*—which he lived to see come out, which was his dearest hope, to produce a book. So that was that one.

Then Bloomsbury wanted me to write the first in a series that would be called *The Writer in the City*, and that book eventually became *The Flâneur*. I asked the editor, who's a friend of mine, how long do you want it to be? She said I don't care. Do you want there to be an index? I don't care. Do you want there to be illustrations? I don't care. Do you want it to have information in it that would help travelers? Oh I don't think so. And it's funny that when I turned in *The Flâneur*, which was all guesswork, it became one of my most successful books.

And then the third book was *Inside a Pearl*. I just thought, well I did live for sixteen years in Paris and haven't written that much about it. And Marie-Claude [de Brunhoff] had recently died, so I wanted to write about our friendship too.

WB: In 1999, you provided an introduction to the Oxford edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. Some reviewers have noted a connection between *Dorian Gray* and your most recent novel, *Our Young Man*. Did Wilde understand something crucial or essential about gay men and their seeming obsession with youth and beauty?

EW: I think the main difference between *Dorian Gray* and *Our Young Man* is that *Dorian Gray* is very, very evil. And our young man is kind of a blank slate. He's not particularly good or bad, but he's probably more good than bad. Yes, of course, women and gay men worry about their looks. They're the two objects of male desire. Gay men *and* women want to look young and beautiful because they're all trying to attract men. Or, at least, that is what society prescribes, that we must possess youth and beauty to attract men.

WB: I read *Our Young Man* this summer when I was on Fire Island, and it really enhanced my experience of being there, since I hadn't been there in the late seventies/early eighties. That novel took shape as you were convalescing from a heart attack. Will you comment on the genesis of *Our Young Man* and why you were drawn once again to the early 1980s?

EW: Well, taking the last part of the question first, I feel most comfortable writing about earlier periods, since I don't fully live in this one. I don't know that much about 2016, whereas I know a lot more about the eighties and nineties. But I also think that was a period when models became supermodels, and that interests me. Suddenly we knew their names, and they were personalities on the stage. People like Naomi Campbell, who was suddenly a star. And Bruce Weber made a lot of male stars out of models. Anyway, that was why I set it then, and also I worked for American *Vogue* in Paris, all throughout the eighties. So that was something I knew a little bit about.

Not *Dorian Gray*, but a French book called *Sapho* is the real template for *Our Young Man*. It's a novel by Alphonse Daudet. And if Daudet had not become a vicious anti-Semite, it might be as famous as *Madame Bovary*. He made a bad career choice because it's a great, great novel. It's about a woman who had been a "kept woman" in Paris, and now she's turning forty. But she still looks twenty-two and decides while she still has her looks and now has some money from all the different rich men who have kept her, that she'd like to have a nice young

lover of her own. So she dupes this young aristocrat who's penniless, from the south of France, into thinking she is his age, twenty-two, but gradually he discovers who she is and that everybody in Paris has had her. But by this point he's completely hooked. And he becomes a diplomat who is sent off to Chile or someplace and she doesn't want to go there because it might ruin her complexion. And so she writes a letter similar to the one that Guy writes at the end of *Our Young Man*. And that was the pattern for the book, but then of course I invented an awful lot of things, like having the identical twins from Minnesota. And I just put that in because it turned me on.

NMR: You've been happily married for a few years now, but it's probably fair to say that your views on gay marriage have evolved over time. How would you chart the progression?

EW: I think we, Michael and I, got married mainly for legal reasons and to protect him as my heir. The other thing is that originally I saw gay marriage as heteronormative, that gay people were trying to imitate straight people. But then I thought, there's so much opposition to gay marriage on the Religious Right, that it must be something good. If people object to it so much, it must be a very powerful statement. So rather than being just imitative of heterosexual life, it's probably something like an assault on heterosexual life. As an old rebel, I like that.

WB: We understand that you may continue teaching even after you retire from Princeton. What advice do you give students who aspire to write fiction in an age where social media is not always the friend of sustained attention spans?

EW: I'm lucky enough to have a couple dozen students who are undergrads and who are all about reading and writing. So I don't even see this as a problem, you know? Highly motivated people will always surface. But I think that you probably always have to be highly motivated, since you don't make any money doing it. Nobody knows who you are. You're not famous; you're not rich. You can't even get tenure. It's a pretty useless thing, writing, and it's a coterie art like writing poetry. Writing fiction is the new poetry.

NMR: Two final questions. You are an icon to your fans. Your writing reflects your courage, talent, brilliance, and the acumen of a survivor—but you are also a university professor. You were my teacher, and you taught me how to think about both literature and creative writing. Twenty-five years later, I find myself teaching my students as you taught me. In that way, you have left a legacy that I haven't seen you discuss. Could you speak to that aspect of your life?

EW: Oh, thank you for that. I just wrote a chapter, which I'm adding to my forthcoming memoir about a life of reading, called "Reading as a Teacher." And it's about the interaction between reading and teaching, because in my classes I usually assign every week a published story by somebody famous like Joy Williams, and then we study that briefly while reading the student papers as well. At Brown, when we first knew each other, I was teaching literature courses designed for writers, and mainly the idea was to show there was something other than Coffee Cup Realism, American style. There were, you know, works like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *The Tin Drum*. My list was just to extend people's range, I think, and to make them realize how big the house of fiction is.

NMR: In several of the interviews in this volume you discuss your early years as

a young gay man. Many have asked you about the elements of yourself in *A Boy's Own Story*. If you could speak to your younger self now, what wisdom would you impart?

EW: I guess to be courageous, especially about jobs. It took me months and months to get my first job, which was with Time-Life, and I worked for them for eight years. And I knew everything I was going to know about that job after three years, and I should have quit and moved on. But I was a very timid person, and I had no courage. I would say to younger people, trust in your powers and assume you'll land on your feet. I don't know; that could be very bad advice too?

NMR: I think it's good advice.

WB: Thank you for speaking with us today. Your work is an inspiration.

EW: Thank you two for doing this book.

Index

The index that appeared in the print version of this title was intentionally removed from the eBook. Please use the search function on your eReading device to search for terms of interest. For your reference, the terms that appear in the print index are listed below.

Adair, Gilbert
AIDES (nonprofit organization)
AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome); activism; in Africa; and the body; and relationships; response from gay community; and self-loathing; and sense of unreality; treatment and prevention; writing about
Altman, Dennis, *Homosexual*
American Academy of Arts and Letters
American Psychiatric Association
American Psychological Association
Amis, Martin
Antaeus
Aristotle
Artaud, Antonin
Ashbery, John
Austen, Jane
“Aux yeux de Mme Beaufort”

Baker, Nicholson, *U and I*
Balanchine, George; *Agon*; *Don Quixote*; *Symphony in C*
Baldwin, James; *Giovanni's Room*
Balzac, Honoré de; *Séraphita*
Banville, John
Barber, Stephen, *Edmund White*
Barrymore, John
Barth, John
Barthelme, Donald
Barthes, Roland
Baudelaire, Charles; “Correspondences”
Bawer, Bruce; *A Place at the Table*
BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation)
Beardsley, Aubrey
Bellow, Saul
Bergman, David
Bernini, Gian Lorenzo
Berryman, John, *Stephen Crane*
Bianchi, Tom, *In Defense of Beauty*
Birch, Charles
Bishop, Elizabeth
Blake, William
Blazey, Peter
Bloomsbury Publishing
Borgia, Cesare
Botton, Alain de, *How Proust Can Change Your Life*
Bowen, Elizabeth
Brainard, Joe, *I Remember*
Bram, Christopher, *Eminent Outlaws*

Bretagne, Charles
Bringing Up Baby
Brodkey, Harold
Brown University
Brunhoff, Marie-Claude de
Bulgakov, Mikhail
Burroughs, William
Bush, George W.
Byron, Lord (George Gordon)

Caffe Cino
Cambridge University
Campbell, Naomi
Camus, Albert, *The Stranger*
Canova, Antonio
Carmen
Carpentier, Alejo
Carroll, Michael
Carver, Raymond
Cassells, Cyrus
Castro, Fidel
Chateaubriand, François-René de, *Les Mémoires d'outre tombe*
Chauncey, George; *Gay New York*
Chekhov, Anton
Christopher Street
Cixous, Hélène
Claudel, Paul
Cocteau, Jean, *The Imposter*
Colette, Sidonie-Gabrielle
Columbia University
Comfort, Alex, *The Joy of Sex*
Condé Nast
Conrad, Joseph
Conroy, Stephen, "The Architect's Dog"
Coover, Robert
Copland, Aaron
Coppola, Sofia, *The Virgin Suicides*
Corn, Alfred
Corneille, Pierre
Cox, Christopher
Cranbrook Schools
Crane, Cora (Cora Ethel Eaton Howarth)
Crane, Stephen
Crébillon, Claude-Prosper Jolyot de
Crystal Boys: A Novel
Cunningham, Michael

Dante Alighieri
Daudet, Alphonse, *Sapho*
de Gaulle, Charles
de Kooning, Willem
Dean, James
Defert, Daniel
DiCaprio, Leonardo
Dickens, Charles; *The Old Curiosity Shop*
Diderot, Denis, *Les Bijoux Indiscrets*
Douglas, Lord Alfred
Dostoevsky, Fyodor; *The Brothers Karamazov*
Doty, Mark

Dowell, Coleman
Duchess (lesbian bar)

E. P. Dutton
East Village Other
Edinburgh International Book Festival
Éditions Gallimard
Elgrably, Jordan
Eliot, T. S.
Ellis, Havelock
Ellmann, Richard, *Oscar Wilde*
Emerson, Ralph Waldo
Eye

Faber & Faber
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
Faulkner, William
Ferro, Robert
Finisterre
Firbank, Ronald
Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *Tender Is the Night*
Flaubert, Gustave; *Madame Bovary*
Fleming, Keith (nephew)
Ford, Richard
Forster, E. M.; *Maurice*
Foucault, Michel; *The Birth of the Clinic*
Fowlie, Wallace
Freedgood, Ann
French, Marilyn
French Order of Arts and Letters
Freud, Sigmund
Fuentes, Carlos

Gaddis, William
Garland, Hamlin
Garland, Judy
Gass, William H.; *Omensetter's Luck*
Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC)
gaydar.net
Geffen, David
Genet, Jean; *Funeral Rites; The Maids*
GetEQUAL
Giacometti, Alberto
Gide, André; *The Journals of André Gide*
Giovanni's Room Bookstore
Glück, Robert
Goldstein, William
Goodman, Paul, *Five Years*
Gordimer, Nadine
Gordon, Edmund
Gordon, Mary
Gorman, Greg
Gorris, Marleen, *Antonia's Line*
Goytisolo, Juan
Grant, Cary
Grauerholz, James
Green, Henry; *Nothing*
Greene, Graham
Gross, Terry

Grumley, Michael
Guggenheim, Peggy
Guggenheim Fellowship
Guibert, Hervé
Gunn, Thomas; "Lament"; *The Man with Night Sweats*

Halliwell, Kenneth
Hampton, Christopher, *Total Eclipse*
Hamsun, Knut; *Hunger*; *Mysteries*; *Pan*; *Victoria*
Harlem Renaissance
Hawkes, John
Hawthorne, Nathaniel; "The Birthmark"; *The Marble Faun*; "Rappaccini's Daughter"
Haydn, Joseph
Hellier, Odile
Hemingway, Ernest
Hesse, Hermann, *Steppenwolf*
Herzen, Alexander
Hofmann, Hans
Holleran, Andrew; *Dancer from the Dance*
Hollinghurst, Alan; *The Folding Star*; *The Line of Beauty*; *The Swimming-Pool Library*
Homer
Hopper, Edward
Hopwood Award
Horizon
House & Garden
Howard, Richard
Hugo, Victor
Human Rights Campaign (HRC)
Huneker, James
Huysmans, Joris-Karl

In the Life (PBS)
Independent
Ingram Merrill Foundation
International Herald Tribune
Irigaray, Luce
Irving, John; *The Cider House Rules*; *The World According to Garp*
Isaacs, Jeremy
Iser, Wolfgang
Isherwood, Christopher; *A Single Man*
Izambard, Georges

James, Henry
Jarmon, Derek
Jerry Springer Show
John, Elton
John of the Cross, Saint
Johns, Jasper
Johns Hopkins University
Johnson, Diane; *Le Divorce*; *Le Marriage*
Jones, Anne
Jouhandeau, Marcel
Joy of Lesbian Sex, *The*
Joyce, James; *Ulysses*
Julius (gay bar)
Jung, Carl

Kael, Pauline
Kafka, Franz

Kalstone, David
Katz, Jonathan Ned, *Love Stories*
Keats, John, *Hyperion*
Kennedy, John F.
Kiš, Danilo: *Garden, Ashes; Hourglass; A Tomb for Boris Davidovitch*
Knopf Doubleday
Kramer, Larry; *Faggots*
Kristeva, Julia
Kundera, Milan
Kurtzberg, Richard L.

Laclos, Pierre Choderlos de
Lafayette, Comtesse de, *La Princesse de Clèves*
Leavis, F. R.
Leavitt, David; *Equal Affections*
LesBiGay Newsletter
L'Express
Lindsay, John
London Sunday Times
Los Angeles Review of Books

Mad Man in America, The
Mailer, Norman
Malraux, André
Man Booker Prize for Fiction
Mandate
Mann, Thomas; *Death in Venice*
Mao Tse-tung
Mapplethorpe, Robert
Marlborough Gallery
Márquez, Gabriel García; *One Hundred Years of Solitude*
Mars-Jones, Adam
Maugham, Somerset
McEwan, Ian
McGuane, Thomas
McKenna, Rollie
McVeigh, Timothy
McWilliam, Candia, *What to Look for in Winter*
Mendelsohn, Daniel
Merrill, James; *The Changing Light at Sandover; Scripts for the Pageant*
Michelangelo Buonarroti
Miller, Arthur
Miller, Henry
Mineshaft (gay club)
Mishima, Yukio
Mitchell Beazkey Publishers
Mitterrand, François
Moby-Dick; or, The Whale
Molière (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin)
Morrison, Toni; *Beloved*
Muller, Max, *Sacred Books of the East*
Murdoch, Iris, *The Black Prince*
Museum of Contemporary Art

Nabokov, Véra
Nabokov, Vladimir; *Lolita; Look at the Harlequins!; Pale Fire*
Nabokov Theatre Company
National Book Critics Circle
New York Institute for the Humanities

New York Review of Books
New York Times
New York Times Book Review
New York University
Nietzsche, Friedrich
Nouveau, Germaine

Oates, Joyce Carol
Ondaatje, Michael
O'Neill, Eugene
Orton, Joe
Ozick, Cynthia

PACS (civil solidarity pact)
Paris Review
Pasolini, Pier Paolo
Paz, Octavio
Peck & Peck (retailer)
PEN America
Perec, Georges, *Je me souviens*
Piaget, Jean
Picador Books
Picano, Felice
Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon, The
Pinter, Harold, *The Collection*
Pirandello, Luigi
Plato
Poe, Edgar Allan
Poirier, Richard
Pound, Ezra
PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis)
Princeton University
Proust, Marcel
Provincetown Bookshop
Publishers Weekly
Publishing Triangle
Pulitzer Prize for Fiction
Pym, Barbara
Pynchon, Thomas; *Gravity's Rainbow*

Quatrefoil

Raban, Jonathan
Racine, Jean
Radiguet, Raymond, *Le Bal du Comte d'Orgel*
Random House
Raritan
Rechy, John; *City of Night*
Reed, Jeremy
Review of Contemporary Fiction
Rilke, Rainer Maria; *Letters to a Young Poet*
Rimbaud, Arthur; "Antique"; "Au cabaret-vert"; "Génie"; "Le Bateau ivre"; "Le Coeur volé"; "Lettre du voyant"; "Voyelles"
Rinaldi, Angelo
Robbe-Grillet, Alain, *Jealousy*
Ruddy, Jim

Sade, Marquis de
Salinger, J. D.; *The Catcher in the Rye*

Sarraute, Nathalie, *Enfance*
 Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Saint Genet*
Saturday Review
 Schaefer, Marilyn
 Schiller, Friedrich
 Schoenberg, Arnold, *Pierrot Lunaire*
 Sedaris, David
 Seligman, Craig, *Sontag and Kael*
 Seurat, Georges
 Shakespeare, William
 Shattuck, Roger
Shenandoah
 Silverstein, Charles
 Sinfield, Alan
 Skinner, B. F.
 Slide (gay bar)
 Sontag, Susan; *Against Interpretation*; "Notes on Camp"
 Sorin, Hubert
 Spackman, W. M.; *An Armful of Warm Girl*; *The Changing Light at Sandover*
 Spencer, Scott, *Endless Love*
 St. Martin's Press
 Stallone, Sylvester
 Stanislavsky, Konstantin
 Starkie, Enid, *Arthur Rimbaud*
 Stein, Gertrude
 Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle); *The Charterhouse of Parma*
 Stevens, Wallace
 Stevenson, Robert Louis
 Stonewall
 Stravinsky, Igor; *Agon*; *Dumbarton Oaks*; *The Firebird*; *Jeu de Cartes*
 Studio
 Sufi
 Sullivan, Andrew
 Sundance Theatre Workshop
Sunday Times
 Swedenborg, Emanuel

 Thompson, Virgil
Time
Time Out
 Time-Life Books
Times Literary Supplement
Tin Drum, The
 Tolstoy, Leo; *The Death of Ivan Ilych*; *War and Peace*
 Trollope, Frances
 Twombly, Cy

 Updike, John
 University of Michigan
 University of Minnesota

 Valéry, Paul
 Van Gogh, Vincent
Vanity Fair
 Verlaine, Georges
 Verlaine, Paul
 Vidal, Gore; *The City and the Pillar*
Village Voice
 Village Voice Bookshop

Violet Quill
Violet Quill Reader, The
Vogue
Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet)

Wadai, Djami
Warhol, Andy
Warner, Marina
Waugh, Evelyn, *Vile Bodies*
Weber, Bruce
Wells, Peter

White, Edmund: on abstract expressionism; on aging; on ambivalence; and autobiographical fiction; on autobiography, pederasty of; on beauty; on being movie-proof; on his biographers; biographical writings; on bohemianism; childhood, writing about; and coming out; on complexity; on esteem love vs. passion; on European and American cultural distinctions; on European and American literary traditions; on female vs. male socialization; on Fire Island; France, residence in; on gay friendships; on gay literature; on gay marriage; on gay monogamy; on gay readers; on gay role models; on gay self-realization; on gay sensibility; as gay writer and spokesman; and gossip; heart attack recovery; on heterosexual vs. homosexual love; on heterosexual experience, translating into gay terms; on HIV, living with; HIV clinicians, advice for; on homosexuality, explanations of; on ideal readers; influences; and the Internet; irony, disdain for; and link between fiction and nonfiction; on the literary canon; literary establishment, rejection from; on literary grants; on living life as a novel; musical components of work; the need to tell all; on New York City in the 1960s; on New York City in the 1970s; parents of; psychoanalysis, rejection of; on reading earlier writers; on recreational drugs; reputation and legacy; on resisting conservatism and cultural coercion; on risks as writer; on the self and Buddhist philosophy; sensual detail, love of; as separatist rather than assimilationist; sex is worth dying for, belief that; on sex, writing about; sexual experiences, first; and social distractions; stroke recovery; on teaching; theatrical writings; themes, recurring; universalism, rejection of; unpublished novels; on writing as therapy; writing habits and strategies; on writing memoir; younger writers, advice to

Works: *Argument for a Myth; Arts and Letters; The Beautiful Room Is Empty; The Blue Boy in Black; A Boy's Own Story; The Burning Library: Essays; Caracole; City Boy: My Life in New York During the 1960s and '70s; The Darker Proof: Stories from a Crisis* (with Adam Mars-Jones); *Fanny: A Fiction; The Farewell Symphony; The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris; Forgetting Elena; "The Gay Philosopher"; Genet: A Biography; "His Biographer"; Hotel de Dream: A New York Novel; Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris; Jack Holmes and His Friend; "Journals of the Plague Years"; The Joy of Gay Sex: An Intimate Guide for Gay Men to the Pleasures of a Gay Lifestyle* (with Charles Silverstein); "The Joys of Gay Life"; Marcel Proust; *The Married Man; My Lives; Nocturnes for the King of Naples; Our Paris: Sketches from Memory* (with Hubert Sorin); *Our Young Man; "The Personal Is Political"; "The Photo"; "Pyrography"; Rimbaud: The Double Life of a Rebel; "Running on Empty"; Sacred Monsters; "Sade in Jeans"; Skinned Alive: Stories; States of Desire: Travels in Gay America; Terre Haute; The Tower Window* (aka *Dark Currents*); *Trios; "Watermark"*

Whitehead, Bill
Whitman, Walt
Whitmore, George
Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*
Williams, Joy
Williams, Nigel
Williams, Tennessee
Williams, William Carlos
Wilson, Doric
Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse; The Years*
Wright, Frances
Wurlitzer, Rudy

Yale University
Yates, Richard
Yourcenar, Marguerite

Zola, Émile